
A Semiotic Investigation of Frida Kahlo: Finding Beauty in Pain, Passion, and Anguish

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Abstract

This paper discusses Frida Kahlo and her artwork. This paper also discusses how we can analyze and observe her paintings from a semiotics lens. By analyzing and observing aspects of Frida Kahlo's life, relationships, and traumas and how that reflects and is depicted in her artwork, we are able to gain a better understanding as to who she was as an individual and who she was as an artist. By doing so, we are also able to further understand her art and the paintings presented within the later sections of this paper.

Introduction

This paper is designed to allow me to think about Frida Kahlo and her art in another perspective and lens. That is, by viewing and analyzing Frida Kahlo and her art from a semiotic perspective, we can grasp and view meaning from her art in a new point of view which can allow us to gather more from her life and art as a whole. Each section, other than the introduction and conclusion will look at some aspect of Frida Kahlo's life and/or art through a semiotics perspective.

The second section of this paper, titled "A Brief Explanation of Surrealism," will walk us through as illustrated in the title, a brief explanation of surrealism. Since Frida Kahlo is a surrealist artist and the majority of her work is surrealist, I feel it is best to explain this particular style of art. Not only will this section serve as a short crash course for those who don't know what surrealism is, but by explaining this art style, this section will also serve as a key point as to how surrealist art, more specifically Frida's art, complicates how we as humans make meaning and thus how we should go about trying to understand and analyze this style of art. This section will touch upon aspects of Peircian semiotics and other semiotic concepts.

The third section of this paper, titled "Frida Kahlo: Creation of a Cultural Icon," heavily relies on ((1)), ((2)), and ((3)) to explain and discuss how Frida became the marked individual and artist many recognize her as today. This section will discuss Frida's upbringing, early life, and mental and physical health complications that have shaped the kind of individual she is known to be as well as her influence for her surrealist art style.

The fourth section of this paper, titled “How Frida’s Life, Personal Affairs & Relationships Influenced Her Art,” serves as an additional section to the previous one to further discuss additional influences such as intimate relationships, multiple miscarriages, and political ties with the communist party that have not only inspired her art style, but also contributes to the surrealist, personal, and intimate elements of her work. This section will refer to ((6)) and possibly ((9)). By explaining this aspect of her personal life, we will gain a better understanding of the context [[7]] and connotative meaning [[6]] as to why art is the way that it is and the multiple interpretations many gain from analyzing her art.

The fifth section of this paper, titled “A Semiotic Analysis of *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932),” discusses and goes through this painting. This section not only discusses the painting itself, but it also covers concepts that can be analyzed within the painting such as: context, connotative meaning, conceptual metaphors [[4]], firstness [[14]], kinesics [[25]], narrative [[30]], and postmodernism [[39]].

The sixth section of this paper, titled “A Semiotic Analysis of *What the Water Gave Me* (1938),” discusses and goes through the painting. This section discusses the painting itself, and its multiple symbolic representations as it does not have one sole focus. In addition, this section also covers its surrealist elements and concepts that can be analyzed within the painting such as: diachronic [[11]], semiotics [[47]], symbol [[58]], presentational symbols [[41]], proxemics [[42]], and syntagmatic [[62]].

The seventh section of this paper, titled “A Semiotic Analysis of *The Two Fridas* (1939),” discusses and goes through the painting itself. Not only does this section provide a detailed discussion of the painting, but this section also covers concepts such as: conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonym [[5]], context, emotive [[13]] of the two Fridas holding each others hands and sitting side by side with their hearts connected, alongside other semiotic concepts.

The eighth section of this paper, titled “Frida’s Portrayal of Feminine and Masculine & Appropriations of Religious Iconography,” mainly relies on ((4)), ((6)), and ((7)) to explain and discuss Frida’s portrayal of feminine and masculine elements within her art, and elements of religious icons and representations or references to religious iconography that is shown in her paintings. Once again, this section will also cover semiotic concepts such as conative function [[3]], icon [[20]], oculosics [[32]], and semiosphere [[48]], and others that have already been introduced and briefly talked about within the previous sections.

The conclusion of this paper summarizes the semiotic ideas which are featured in this the consideration of Frida Kahlo, her life, and artwork throughout the paper. In addition, this paper touches upon and analyzes Frida Kahlo and her work in a different perspective and considers the possible underlying meanings. More so, because we analyzing her art through a semiotic lens, we gain a deeper understanding of not just her art as a whole, but the individual elements and pieces that created the paintings altogether.

A Brief Explanation of Surrealism

Before we get into great detail about Frida Kahlo and her paintings, it only makes sense to discuss and address the art style she typically uses in her paintings. In ((10)), we are given an explanation of what surrealism is and how semiotics [[47]] can be related to this particular art style. Surrealism, and the surrealist elements prevalent in Frida's works represents unrealistic, dreamlike states. ((10)) refers to André Breton's observation in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, that surrealist art is mainly based on "play of thought" and "omnipotence of dream." That is, this art style and related elements we will be examining and analyzing throughout each and everyone of Frida's works within this paper have to do with very unrealistic and dreamlike states. However, we will begin to see that although Frida's works are dreamlike, there are both unrealistic and realistic elements utilized.

Surrealism is not based on the "play of thought" and "omnipotence of dream," but utilizes markedness and more specifically, marked elements as a way to maintain the dreamlike state of the art. As ((12)) explains, the core and intent of surrealism is to challenge imposed values and norms, thus surrealism constitutes signs and elements used within art as marked. Not only are marked elements used within art in order to depict a surrealist art style, but surrealist art utilizes the disregarded and unconventional to its advantage. For example, there are cases, especially in Frida's works in which infinite semiosis [[24]] can be prevalent given that the material manifestation of the sign illustrated in art, the signifier [[56]] can also in turn work as the concept that appears in our mind once we've encountered the signifier illustrated in art, the signified [[55]]. Because we are discussing concepts such as the *signifier* and the *signified*, it is important to note that by introducing these two semiotic elements and how they tie to surrealism, we must also recognize that these elements are identified as two inseparable parts of Saussure's concept of the sign [[53]]. Overall, this art style is not only used to depict something other than the norm, but this movement's intent works towards freedom and liberation that can be further expressed in art.

Frida's relationship with surrealism is so closely connected that when one thinks of Frida and her works, connotatively [[6]] speaking, surrealism is closely associated with her works. In Frida's five paintings that we are examining: *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932); *What the Water Gave Me* (1938); *The Two Fridas* (1939); *The Wounded Table* (1940); and *The Broken Column* (1944), surrealism and surrealist elements are utilized in every painting one way or another. In *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), we see surrealist elements such as six different objects "flying" around her all the while tied to her through her umbilical cord. She is also lying helplessly on a bed in the middle of nowhere with a distant city in the background. In *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), we see a Frida lying in the water in what appears to be a bathtub, and in the water's reflection there are several surrealist elements depicting various events in Frida's life. In *The Two Fridas* (1939), there are surrealist elements such as both of the Frida's hearts open and visible, connecting with one another in order to connect both of the Fridas themselves. In *The Wounded Table* (1940), there are surrealist elements such as a table with human legs, a deer, a skeleton figure, and much more. Lastly, in *The Broken Column* (1944), surrealist elements such as Frida's spine being replaced by a broken column, nails all over her body, a split in her torso, and other elements are prevalent

within the painting. By briefly going over each of the paintings we will be analyzing, we gain a further understanding and insight as to why her works are considered surrealist.

Surrealism is not only closely tied to Frida and her works, but it is also related to the concepts of firstness [[14]], secondness [[46]], and thirdness [[64]]. Additionally, because we are discussing Peirce's triadic model of the sign [[52]], this also includes discussing the representamen [[44]], interpretant [[22]], and object [[33]], which are components that are included in his model. That is, within understanding the concept of surrealism and how Frida utilizes the art style in her own works, and analyzing her works through a semiotic perspective, we come to see these semiotic concepts embedded within her art. In ((10)), we are explained that Peirce's triadic model of the sign relates to surrealism if we view and interpret aspects of surrealist art from a more semiotic based perspective as opposed to some other perspective. For instance, if we view the elements of a painting, whether it be color, brush strokes, subject of image, etc, this can be viewed as *the representamen*; the recognition of the connection between elements of a painting can be viewed as *the interpretant*; and the emotional and/or social response generated by style and composition of a work can be viewed as *the object* since this relates to the meaning associated with the elements of a painting (representamen). **In the case of firstness**, Frida's art conveys complex stories from which we gather all kinds and sorts of meanings and there is no doubt that the bits of meaning we gather from her art are derived from some form of feeling or isolated perception. **In the case of secondness**, surrealist art including Frida's works illustrates all kinds of stories, such as the common theme of miscarriage as shown in *Henry Ford Hospital*, which depending on who is viewing and analyzing the piece could form some sort of meaning derived from how they personally relate or not relate among what they view and perceive from the painting. Lastly, **regarding thirdness**, because Frida's work amongst the majority of surrealist works alike typically defy the norm, what is to be considered conventional rules and rules that govern social/cultural interactions and practices, when viewing and analyzing surrealist pieces such as Frida's works, our form of meaning of her works will differ depending on what we view as the norm and what is considered socially and/or culturally acceptable. Given the fact that Frida's works touches upon topics and subjects such as infidelity, miscarriage, politics (i.e. communism), etc we will see just how relevant the concepts of firstness, secondness, and thirdness are towards analyzing her works. By understanding the connection between Peirce's triadic model with surrealism, it gives us a better understanding and perspective as to how there is a connection between semiotics concepts such as the ones discussed within this section and Frida's works.

Regarding connotation and denotation, we must also view and interpret as to how these two semiotic concepts can be related to surrealism, i.e. Frida's works. While *connotation* refers to associations surrounding the signs, denotation refers to the precise, strict meaning of a sign. Both can be tied to surrealism in the sense that connotatively speaking, surrealist works and Frida's can be viewed and interpreted in many ways. Because connotation is associated with personal experiences and can be "shared" to different degrees amongst the individuals viewing surrealist works of art, the connotative meaning of any one of Frida's works will be viewed and interpreted differently. Even if her works of art or other surrealist pieces are viewed multiple times by the same person, the connotative meaning can slightly or drastically differ each time depending on

what is really be focused on when viewing and analyzing her paintings. Denotatively speaking, because *denotation* for nonverbal signs is associated with the most direct meaning of a sign, we will get random bits and elements that once recognized defines the art style surrealism itself and represents the components that make up surrealism. Overall, by understanding the different ways in which we can understand and form some sort of meaning when viewing and analyzing Frida's works, we also come to understand when observing her paintings and other surrealists alike, no individual will come to the same interpretation or conclusion at the same time. Every individual will gather and form meaning of surrealist works of art differently and in their own unique way.

Frida Kahlo: Creation of a Cultural Icon

By explaining *surrealism*, and more importantly Frida's main art style of choice, **we can now move on to focusing on Frida herself**. Aspects and elements within Frida's life such as her upbringing, early life, mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing will be discussed in order to understand and realize how and why she became to be the marked individual we recognize her as today. We must not only observe and analyze Frida's paintings in order to form some sort of meaning and interpretations of them, but almost every element and aspect of her paintings are deeply personal and intimate. Furthermore, because of how personal and intimate elements that make up the majority of her paintings are, by gaining a better understanding of the context behind each personal detail of her paintings, we can better observe and analyze her works. We will use ((1)), ((2)), and ((3)) in order to touch upon these topics.

Born in July 6th, 1907, in Coyoacán, Mexico City, Mexico - before Frida's life became devoted to her passion for art and painting, she grew up with a lack of an emotional bond with her mother while only recalling warm and affectionate memories with her father. Although ((1)) explains that Frida did describe her mother as very kind, active, and intelligent, she also described her as calculating, cruel, and fanatically religious as opposed to her father who although was warm and affectionate, was unfortunately riddled with "veritgos every month and a half" and fought with epilepsy for sixty years. Despite the contrast in relationship between her and her mother, and her and her father, Frida still recalled her childhood as marvelous and had even written it in her diary. Frida argued that although her father was a sick man, he was "an immense example to her of tenderness, of work, and above all understanding for her problems." When Frida was diagnosed with polio, a paralytic disease at the age of six, for the nine months she was in recovery, her father was the one who took care of her. This is also where Frida's trademark long skirts also came into the picture. That is, because her right leg grew thin and her right foot was stunted in its growth, no matter how much physiotherapy she did, her right leg and foot were still deformed and thus became an affliction which young, adolescent Frida sought to hide beneath trousers, and later her trademark long Mexican skirts. Although she went from attracting negative attention in her younger years, in her later years is where she began to attract admiring attention with her "exotic attire." Regarding Frida's journey with painting and all things art related, she was introduced to art at a young age since she would often accompany her father who was an enthusiastic amateur artist on painting excursions into the local countryside. He also taught her how to use a camera and how to develop,

retouch, and color photographs, which helped her and became useful later in her life when she began to pick up painting. All in all, without getting into too much detail as we will get into more detail of her art career and influential relationships in later sections, the older she got and the more complex and turbulent her life became, the more reason and context there is behind as to how and why she was the way she was.

Now although we are able to further understand how and why her complicated upbringing shaped her to become the complex individual we recognize her to be, **her physical and mental health were also two main components and reasons as to why her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood were as complicated as it was for her.** As previously explained, Frida developed poliomyelitis at the age of 6 years old. However, this infectious, viral and potentially paralytic disease was not the only setback she's had to go through in her lifetime. ((3)) explains that in her teens, she was also in a significantly traumatic trolley car accident which led her to endure numerous failed spinal surgeries, which ultimately caused her to undergo a limb amputation. Now although this event alone is traumatic in itself and would set many people back, this source explains that despite her enduring "several physical, emotional, and psychological traumas in her lifetime...through her art, she was able to transcend a life of pain and disability." A huge indicator and form of narrative reasoning, that is the thinking and decision making processes used in clinical practice Frida utilized, was not only through analyzing her life, but as well as her art. ((3)) explains that by exploring and more so examining her life history, the "underlying neurophysiological mechanisms and clinical presentation of chronic pain may be further appreciated." Regarding the specifics and details of the trolley accident, this was a turning point in Frida's teen years because not only was she hit by a streetcar while riding the trolley, but she also sustained significant traumas and was pierced by an iron handrail from the streetcar and had entered her left hip and exited through her pelvic floor. Although there are several physical traumas she has unfortunately had to go through and experience, there are just as many psychological and emotional trauma she has had to experience in her life. Even when Frida's career was taking off and she began to travel from place to place despite her physically and mentally in a constant state of flux, her life became more turbulent and emotionally draining once she married Diego Rivera in 1929, only four years after her accident. Considering the endless amount of traumatic events she's had to live through, it is no surprise that she was described to have struggled with emotional instability and low-grade depression. Although she was also described as having a charismatic and vibrant personality, there were certain moments in her life where she was plagued by major depressive episodes and suicidal thoughts. These moments and stages in her life would come by and be triggered by her chronic pain, multiple miscarriages, and the reoccurring and constant affairs her husband, Diego Rivera, had throughout their on and off again marriage. In addition to suicidal thoughts, and low-grade depression, alcohol and drug abuse were also evident throughout her adult life as well as possibly being a victim of sexual abuse during her childhood. ((3)) claims that it is "purported that Frida's first sexual experience was with a female teacher at her school, when she was only 13 years of age" and there are other hints that her so-called "warm and affectionate" father could have also sexually abused her at a young age. Although the history of sexual abuse might not be true, it doesn't make it any less disturbing and if anything provides further possible reasons and context of the psychological and emotional

trauma she might have gone through in her early life. By taking her physical, psychological, and emotional traumas into account when going through her art and her life, it also provides us with a “narrative reasoning” of sorts that help us understand her life history and more importantly, her as an individual.

By going in depth with Frida’s personal life, mental, physical, psychological, and emotional history and traumas, **we must also discuss how her physical and mental issues shaped her art style as well as how the public viewed her as an individual.** As ((2)) simply puts it, “all the physical and spiritual suffering Kahlo experienced is reflected in her art. Obsessed with her health and suffering, she created a pictorial oeuvre that is intense and emotive. It narrates with a desolate sensitivity what she wanted us to know of her life; her own pictures give shape to the Frida Kahlo myth” (((2))), page 8). Although Frida was introduced and exposed to art from a young age because of her father being an amateur artist, ((1)) explains that her first attempts at painting began in 1927, *Portrait of Miguel N. Lira*, which up until 1925, her only artistic encouragement came from Fernando Fernandez, who was a friend of her father’s who taught her how to draw. Because Frida’s art style, surrealism, is already an art style the defies the norm and is always interpreted in differently, Frida’s works contain elements that are not only outside of reality and considered eccentric or outlandish, but because they also contain graphic personal and intimate details of her life, it serves as an indicator and depiction of significant and traumatic events that have occurred throughout her life. That is, surrealist elements such as a depiction of a healthy and able Frida staring into the future as a broken and hurt Frida lies in the bed facing away in her painting *Tree of hope, Keep Firm* (1946). The elements and subject within this particular painting explained in ((2)), not only portrays a Frida in pain with a jagged bleeding incision, but this portrays her failed spinal fusion surgery that although she bids herself to “stay strong” and “keep firm,” this was in reality “a turning point in her decline, leading to her death.” Such physical trauma caused her a great deal of psychological and emotional trauma which caused her to falsely depict or change the narrative as to what really happened with her failed spinal surgery. This goes to show that not only did Frida use her life and traumatic experiences as the subject or plot points within her paintings, but because these experiences and events throughout her life impacted her mental and physical health beyond belief, this goes to show just how her mental and physical health issues shaped not only her art, but herself as an individual.

Through analyzing and examining Frida’s early life, adolescence, adulthood, and all of the traumatic experiences that have occurred throughout her lifetime, we come to see why she was and is still considered a unique and *marked* individual worldwide. First off, not only was she considered unique because of her art and physical appearance, but she broke the stigma and broke down barriers for people and women with mental health issues, those of color, those with disabilities, and the LGBTQIA+ community. As ((1)) and ((2)) explain, Frida was bisexual for almost all her life until she came out as lesbian her last few years before she passed in 1954. Not only was her being openly bisexual a topic of interest, discussion, and overall debate when discussing her personal life, but throughout the years as her husband was openly involved with affairs outside the marriage, she began to do the same with both men and women. Additionally, as a woman who openly dealt and struggled with her mental and physical health, no matter how

private she tried to keep that aspect of her life from the public her last few years alive, throughout the entirety of her art career she still gave a voice to several communities given the fact that she portrayed and illustrated aspects of her experiences through her art. By illustrating her personal experiences dealing with her mental health issues and physical health issues, she showed the public and the eyes of the ignorant that not only could she openly express how she physically and emotionally felt throughout some of her darkest times in her life, but that she could overcome them and do unimaginable and great things despite what she was going through. She is not only a symbol of strength because of all the great things she has done in her lifetime, but she is considered as such because she has showed such strength and resilience through expressing her vulnerability in her art. Below in figure 1 is a photograph of Frida Kahlo taken by one of Frida's ex-lovers, Nickolas Muray circa 1941.



Figure 1. Nickolas Muray photographs Frida circa 1941

How Frida's Life, Personal Affairs & Relationships Influenced Her Art

We can now focus on how Frida's life, personal affairs, and relationships that have influenced her art. Throughout this section, we will be discussing and taking a closer look at Frida's more intimate and personal details of her life. We not only look at Frida's relationship history with Diego Rivera, but with others throughout her marriage(s) with Diego. We also take a closer look at her experiences with her multiple miscarriages; her political ties with the communist party; and how her overall relationships, romantic or not, and other life experiences reflect in her art. We will use ((2)), ((6)), ((8)), and ((9)) in order to further analyze Frida's personal life.

As soon as Frida began to paint, she met Diego, whom she married the next summer at the age of 22 in 1929, and again remarried him in 1940. Despite the amount of fame Frida had, as ((6)) explains it, she gained fame for her "communist politics, rather less so for her painting, and for her flamboyant personality and the ongoing, highly public saga of her marriage to muralist Diego Rivera. Diego was not only a big part of her life romantically, but he also contributed to a lot of her psychological and emotional distress throughout her life. In ((2)), the author explains that "like many others, I am sure, I thought of her as a stoic woman who had suffered constantly in her life, as much from her problems of poor health as from the continual deception of a philandering husband" (((2)), page 8). However, what makes her relationship with Diego even more complicated is that she was just as unfaithful to him as he was to her. By both Diego and Frida bringing in others into their relationship, and having one affair after the next, this only caused further emotional turmoil and conflict within Frida herself. However, despite the endless amount of suffering both of them put themselves through, they were still married with only one short break. Travelling in Europe and the United States, the author in ((2)) explains that Frida built a personal world for herself that was separate from that of her husband, and by doing so she produced much more artwork. "Frida was much more than an artist's model or the wife of a famous painter. With strength and patient dedication, she created her own work, distinct from the art movements of her time. She demonstrated that she could flourish beneath the shade of a tree as prominent as Diego" (((2)), page 8).

Because we've discussed and gotten to briefly observe the toxic cycle of suffering both Frida and Diego put themselves through in order to stay together, it is only fitting we also discuss and analyze one of their only desires as a couple, to have a baby. It is no surprise that Frida was physically not equipped to have a child of her own. Not only do her multiple health issues play a role, but the aftermath of the trolley accident alone and how that affected her body, not only affected that but her physical health and as well as her chances of safely delivering a baby. As ((9)) explains, a year into Frida and Diego's marriage, both of them flew to the United States during a politically tense time towards the Communist party. This period in Frida's life was a particularly tough time for her. Not only did her husband, Diego rack up a numerous amount of affairs outside his and Frida's relationship, but this is a time where she experienced her very well publicized and tragic miscarriage. This miscarriage is depicted in one of her most famous paintings, *Henry Ford Hospital* in 1932. Although this painting is indeed a portrait of a physical event that had occurred in Frida's life and depicts her physical suffering, because this miscarriage left her physically,

emotionally, and psychologically destroyed, ((9)) explains that her physical suffering is inseparable from her psychic suffering. The relationship between Frida Kahlo and motherhood has always been a complex and painful one to look at and grasp. Because Frida's relationship with her own mother was cold and distant, by miscarrying the child, Frida depicts and clearly views a miscarriage as a maternal failure. "The ultimate desire of the child, to be seen, is a fundamental birthright. A mother's not seeing, not truly seeing, her child is a maternal failure; it is miscarriage. Frida suffered dreadfully from having not been seen by her mother, from having been "miscarried"; in this painting she leads us through that suffering" (((9)), page 382). Although there are other paintings in which she depicts this same and tragic topic, by just observing her overall view and experience with her miscarriage depicted in *Henry Ford Hospital*, we gain an understanding as to why a subject such as this would not only influence her art but shape her as an individual.

Now that we have mentioned Frida's personal and intimate relationship history with Diego Rivera, it is only fitting that we discuss the political party and movement both were heavily involved in. That is, we are discussing Frida's political ties with the communist party, her political relationships with significant figures of the communist movement, and how this aspect of her life is reflected in her art. As ((8)) explains, Frida started becoming involved in the communist party by attending gathering of Communist sympathizer where she met Diego Rivera. Diego at the time of them getting married (in 1929), was already a famous painter. Despite their marriage going through hell and back, both remained comrades, participating in communist demonstrations and were in the Revolutionary Artist Union, which was an organization of left-wing artists. Because of how involved Frida was becoming within the political movement, she became deeply affiliated when Russian communist leader Leon Trotsky was exiled and arrived in Mexico. She not only let him reside in her house, but once Frida and Diego remarried, Trotsky was murdered. This inevitably so, led both Frida and Diego to be suspects of Trotsky's murder, but were cleared and had divorced yet again. This period in her life is where Kahlo became an art teacher as well as continuing her active role in the communist party, however, she rejected Stalinism and embraced the ideals of China's Mao Zedong's instead. Throughout her life, as she was facing the instable and toxic environment of what it was to be married to Diego Rivera, she simultaneously banded together with him in order to take on the active role that she did within the communist party. This not only shows an interesting contrast between Frida and Diego's relationship on a personal level and on a political level, but this also illustrates how strongly tied and connected Frida was to the communist movement.

A Semiotic Analysis of *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932)

On to the first painting *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932). In this section, we closely examine different aspects of the painting. Because we are analyzing this painting from a semiotics perspective, we will be focusing on several different aspects within the painting itself and the narrative [[30]] and context [[7]] behind the painting. When examining the painting, we are also looking for and relating aspects of firstness, conceptual metaphors [[4]], and connotative meaning with what we find about the painting itself. Lastly, we are examining elements of kinesics and postmodernism within the painting. By examining the different aspects of this painting using ((3)), ((5)), and ((7)), as well as focusing on how different semiotic concepts can interpret the meaning of this particular painting, we are able to understand how we can analyze Frida's art through a semiotics lens in addition to analyzing it through an artistic lens.

Before we get to the semiotic bits and aspects of the painting, we must first analyze and see what the painting includes artistically and stylistically speaking. That is, we must examine the overall painting and what kinds of elements are included within this painting. In ((5)), we begin by looking at what appears to be a Frida, lying on the bed naked with blood splattered and hemorrhaging on the bed sheets. Not only did she decide to utilize such a personal and intimate perspective of herself to those viewing this particular painting, but by adding elements of discomfort, pain, and agony as we can see the body contorting and twisting in an uncomfortable manner, illustrates a very personal and painful memory of what could have been. If we look around the Frida lying on the bed, we can see six objects floating around her. We first see what connects all six objects to her are red ribbons that appear to be her umbilical cords, a male fetus, what appears to be an orthopedic cast, an orchid shaped to look like a uterus, a pelvic bone, a snail, and a machine of sorts. The male fetus is not only placed in this painting to represent her miscarriage but is a representation of what could have been for her and Diego. A future that they both longed to have. The snail was placed in this painting to signify time. Because the operation for this miscarriage was slow, she decided to illustrate and depict the slowness of the operation by using a snail as the symbol. She also painted the city of Detroit, Michigan as the background for where this painting took place since this city was the location as to where the miscarriage took place.

By having first looked at the overall painting, we can now focus on the context and narrative behind the painting. That is, we must also examine the context and meaning behind why she chose the six objects floating around her, and why she chose to depict her miscarriage in such a graphic manner. Regarding the physical and social environment in which the signs, the elements she used for this painting, she utilized the city in which the hospital was located as the background of the painting. Not only did she choose this particular city as the background to provide further information as to where her miscarriage occurred, but by choosing this particular background, this provides us as the audience with more information that this city and hospital was clearly an important location where a life changing, and traumatic event had occurred. Regarding the six objects floating around her, the floating objects serve as contextual bits of information that provides more information and context behind why her body was covered in blood and contorted

in such a manner. That is, the six objects tied to her through what appears to be umbilical cords represent that the scene she has depicted is in fact a miscarriage and nothing but that. The use of painting her naked body lying helplessly on the hospital bed, the six floating objects, the background, and other elements within the painting not only provides more information as to what Frida was depicting, but that it in fact depicts and illustrates her own personal experience at the Henry Ford Hospital when she miscarried.

Now, regarding *firstness*, this painting demonstrates this particular “way of knowing” because of the isolated feelings from which we can derive meaning. That is, within this painting, although we’ve already derived the general meaning of Frida’s experience with miscarriage during her stay in Detroit, Michigan, we have yet to semiotically analyze and interpret the images and elements used within the painting and the painting as a whole. The overall painting illustrates firstness due to the isolated perception of Frida undergoing the painful process of losing her child. Not only does she depict her miscarriage through illustrating her writhing in pain and agony on the hospital bed, but by depicting the six elements that are related to miscarriage, she is able to portray the painful elements, memories, and aspects of miscarriage that not many people in a broad audience can fully understand or even relate to. Conceptual metaphors such as the Detroit background in the painting, the umbilical cords tying herself to the six objects, and the bed with *July of 1932 E.R., Henry Ford Hospital Detroit* being written on the sides are all throughout the painting. These elements used within the painting are metaphors which illustrate the overall concept of miscarriage. However, although it illustrates the overall concept and idea of miscarriage, details such as the writings on the side of the bed and floating objects, such as the orthopedic cast and the orchid cater this illustration of miscarriage and closely ties it to Frida’s personal experience rather than just anyone’s experience with miscarriage. Through discussing different aspects, concepts, narratives, amongst other things while observing this painting, we have also identified its connotative meaning. That is, connotatively speaking we have identified that this painting is not only associated with Frida’s personal experience, but the elements she utilizes to portray her own experience with miscarriage are “shared” to varying degrees amongst individuals depending on what they know about miscarriage, if they have experienced it, and how their own experience(s) were if they have gone through it or something similar. As ((7)) explains it, the visible strings or umbilical cords Frida’s attached to aren’t only physical ties, but emotional ties to her unborn fetus and “these strings are concrete representations of the spiritual and psychological bonds between her artistic expression and the traumas related to the biological crises of female sexuality that she portrayed in her many canvases depicting birth” (((7))), page 44). This painting is also closely associated with feelings such as loneliness, pain, loss, and helplessness that comes along with this unfortunate experience certain people have to go through when taking the risk of becoming pregnant. As ((3)) explains it, maybe what makes Frida’s art so appealing is that her work is “related to her ability to pull back the curtain and expose this marginalizing experience.” Although there are several other connotative meanings for this painting alone, these are the ones that are typically the most widely identified when analyzing this painting. Provided below in figure 2 is an image of the painting, *Henry Ford Hospital*.



Figure 2. Henry Ford Hospital (1932)

A Semiotic Analysis of *What the Water Gave Me* (1938)

In this second painting, *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), we are analyzing more semiotic concepts within the painting. This also signifies that we are being introduced to more semiotic concepts the further we get into our semiotic investigation and analysis of Frida's paintings. We will analyze the painting's illustration of diachronic [[11]] elements, symbolic [[58]] representations, presentational symbols [[41]], illustration of proxemics [[42]], and syntagmatic [[62]] elements. Because this particular painting contains several images and surrealist elements, with the help of analyzing each and almost every aspect (to the best of our ability), we must analyze how each semiotic concept can help us better analyze this painting from a semiotics lens. Certain aspects of the painting pertain to some semiotic concept or concepts introduced within this section. With the help of ((3)), ((7)), and ((16)) we can better understand and see which semiotic concepts better relate to what we are analyzing within the painting.

When Frida was explaining this painting to her friend Julien Levy, she explained this painting as having to do with "an image of passing time about time and childhood games in the bathtub and the sadness of what had happened to her in the course of her life." That is, because this painting in itself pertains to traumatic moments in Frida's life, and how time passes by throughout the course of her life, we can analyze this painting diachronically. By diachronically analyzing aspects of the painting such as the bathtub, we can see that this very ordinary and mundane aspect of her life shifted quite drastically the older she got. She once viewed and associated the bathtub with being young and playing childhood games in the tub. However, her view shifted as she now utilized this one happy aspect of her life as an element and more importantly the setting in which all the traumatic events occurred in her life. More so, this shift in what the bathtub meant for her is explicitly shown as she only depicted the sadness and trauma that has constantly occurred in her life in the one thing that used to remind her of happy moments in her childhood.

There isn't a particular or dominant main focus within the painting and we have only focused on the bathtub so far. However, we come to see that the several elements used in this painting are numerous elements from her previous works as explained and analyzed in ((16)). We can first start off with what appears to be Frida's legs and feet sitting in the half full bathtub. At first glance, this shouldn't mean much since this is what any person would do when getting in a bathtub. Yet, if we recall of Frida's chronic pain and multiple physical health issues as ((3)) explains it, something as relieving as a warm bath could be for some, for someone like Frida who had allodynia it was probably not the case. That is, Frida's condition would cause her a tremendous amount of "burning pain" if she were to take a warm bath. So, a Frida in this bathtub is not only symbolic of her memories associated with her childhood in the bathtub playing games, but this could also symbolize the sudden shift in what once used to be a relieving, calm bath turned to a painful experience if done again later in life. In addition to that, Frida depicted her right foot and leg to be bleeding and quite scratched up. Her showing her legs and feet peeking through all the chaos in the center of the painting is symbolic of the constant health issues and complications she faced with her right leg due to her contracting polio at a young age. A particular image within this painting that serves as a presentational symbol, is the depiction of a young woman lying above the

water seemingly still and helpless. Her body contorting in an uncomfortable manner similar to what we've seen in figure 2 shows that she utilized the image for this painting. Not only that, but by utilizing the same image from *Henry Ford Hospital*, this indicates that she placed that particular memory in this painting because it was one of the life changing and traumatic events that have taken place in her life. One in which she felt she had to include in this bathtub depicting the "sadness of what had happened to her in the course of her life." Although there are several symbolic representations and presentational symbols scattered throughout this painting, and what appears to be an endless amount given that there are multiple elements, symbols, and images utilized, we focused on the few that we did in order to move on to discussing other aspects of the painting and how they are related to semiotic concepts such as *proxemics* and *syntagmatic elements* as we will discuss next.

Regarding *proxemics*, ((14)) describes this subcategory or branch of semiotics and anthropology as the study of nonverbal communication and further explains that this subcategory can be defined as "the interrelated observation and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture." This painting illustrates and depicts proxemics through the smaller images utilized and scattered throughout the painting. We will be focusing on solely one image for the sake of properly analyzing this painting utilizing proxemics. The image of the two women lying next to one another in the far right, bottom corner is not only depicted in this painting but serves as the main subject in her later painting, *Two Nudes in a Forest* (1939). The physical closeness depicted in this image serves as a symbol recalling one of experiences in which she was in a very meaningful and intimate relationship outside of her and Diego's. The image depicts one of her very first relationships with a woman, and it is none other than Mexican movie star, Dolores del Rio. The depiction of the physical closeness and nudity of the two women, Frida and Dolores, illustrate not only a physical closeness in the relationship, but this also illustrates that they allowed their intimate relationship to bring them closer emotionally. Yet again, this relationship Frida had with Dolores must have meant something to her if she decided to include this particular image within the painting.

Regarding *syntagmatic* elements and relationships shown within the painting, we must first identify which elements within the painting are considered as such. According to [[62]], "A syntagmatic relationship is about position – involving a sequence of signs that together create meaning and refers to the arrangements of the signs in the text." Although we are looking for syntagmatic elements within a painting and not in text, this definition remains relevant. Because there are several components, that is, images within the painting that all seemingly appear as if they do not relate to one another, it might appear as if the images, the elements Frida utilizes within the painting do not refer to a sequence of signs or refer to any particular arrangement that could consider them as syntagmatic elements. However, because each element symbolizes moments and memories within Frida's life, and they have all occurred in some sort of sequence, those same images that depict and symbolize the moments in her life are therefore syntagmatic. As ((7)) explains it, "Kahlo's paintings show us the misery behind her facade of alegria" (p. 60). Embellished liberally with biographical details (including Kahlo's relationship with her father, her experience with polio, the bus accident that permanently disabled the artist and made it

impossible for her to bear children, her teenage boyfriend, her life with husband Diego Rivera, her lovers, her recoveries and relapses to health and into illness, and so on), Herrera reveals Kahlo's paintings as acts of therapy and means for survival" ((7)), page 46). Although this does not refer to this painting in particular, the author refers to Kahlo's paintings in general. All in all, the depiction and illustration of several moments in Frida's life not only provides much more to look at, but to analyze, especially through a semiotics lens. Provided below in figure 3 is an image of the painting, *What the Water Gave Me*.



Figure 3. *What the Water Gave Me* (1938)

A Semiotic Analysis of *The Two Fridas* (1939)

In this third painting, *The Two Fridas* (1939), we are analyzing more semiotic concepts within the painting. This also signifies that we are being introduced to more semiotic concepts the further we get into our semiotic investigation and analysis of Frida's paintings in addition to the ones that we have previously been introduced to. We will analyze the painting's context and contextual elements, conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonym [[5]], and emotive function [[13]]. We must analyze how each semiotic concept introduced within this section can help us better analyze this painting from a semiotics lens. That is, by analyzing the main aspects of the painting, e.g. the two Fridas, the hearts connecting them, etc, we will see and be able to interpret how certain aspects of the painting pertains to some semiotic concept or concepts. ((7)) and ((17)) not only allows us to better understand the painting overall, but the semiotic concepts that are related to the painting and elements within the painting.

((17)) explains that this particular painting, along with many other Frida's works, are self-referential and from early on, "became her most effective device for expressing a certain unease about exploring her own personality." In addition, as ((7)) explains, Frida's self portraits "came to stand in the popular imagination for the Mexican nation as wounded, fragmented, and split, as internally tortured and ambiguously figured in relation to its own borders" (((7))), page 217 *Contextually speaking*, the painting itself was completed shortly after she and Diego divorced. Elements such as the contrast in clothing Frida placed on the left as opposed to the one on the right illustrate the split in and difference between the two Fridas. Because of her tumultuous and painfully traumatic relationship with Diego, Frida's depiction of the two Fridas serve its purpose to express how Frida felt after the separation. That is, Frida's desperation and feelings of loneliness that had occurred once she separated from Diego are the real emotions and conflicting feelings that Frida is trying to convey through the painting. This particular reason as to how and why this painting came about, not only shows the reasoning behind the painting, but also the context as to why she used the two Fridas as the main and dominant element within the painting. More importantly, the meaning behind it.

Regarding *conceptual metaphors*, a metaphor (phrase/sentence) in which illustrates a specific idea or concept, and one that is useful to explain and illustrate a complex and/or abstract concept – we are analyzing elements within this painting that could possibly be considered as such. Elements and images within the painting such as the use of two Fridas, the clothing on both of the Fridas, and the hearts (one cut and torn open while the other isn't) are all relevant to identifying whether or not they are conceptual metaphors or not. Starting off with the use of two Fridas within the painting. As explained before, while Frida using self-referential images, such as the two Fridas here is not an uncommon thing for her to do, there is purpose and intent as to why she is utilizing this stylistic approach. That is, because the context behind her creating this painting had to do with her separation with Diego, the two Fridas depict Frida's split identities. More so the two Fridas is a metaphor for the ambivalent, conflicting, and amongst other complex feelings Frida must have been feeling during the time of her not only creating this painting, but throughout the entirety of her trying to process her own emotions as she had just been separated from her

husband. Moving on to the next conceptual metaphor within the painting, the clothing both Fridas are wearing. We see that the Frida on the left is wearing a white lace dress with European-style embroidery while the Frida on the right is wearing a traditional Tehuana dress. The traditional dress is what we want to more so focus on. This is because this dress references to a particular dress that Diego happened to love seeing Frida in. That is, this dress is a conceptual metaphor towards the little things he loved and cared for about Frida while they were together. Especially because this Frida on the right also has a small portrait of Diego in her hand, this Frida represents her longing for Diego and what they had while they were together. Lastly, we focus on the visible and exposed hearts seen on both Fridas. As we can see on the left side, this Frida not only cut her artery with scissors as explained by ((17)), resulting in staining her white shirt, but this Frida's heart is also cut open and torn. The artery that was cut with scissors came from the right side Frida's heart. That is, because the Frida on the left side is close to bleeding to death, this image in addition to the stormy and cloudy weather are a metaphor that represents Frida's inner turmoil and conflict.

We now move on to the next semiotic concept prevalent within this painting, which is *conceptual metonymy*. The use of two Fridas in this painting is in itself a conceptual metonymy. That is, because both Fridas, although they represent two entirely different aspects and feelings Frida herself had towards Diego, both physical representations of Frida no matter how different they are, are still connected to the one Frida. So no matter how different they are, because both Fridas are closely related and both stem from Frida herself, this shows that the depiction of both Fridas are both figures are from the same concept. As ((17)) explains, "the hearts of both Fridas are exposed and connected to one another."

Because this painting not only references Frida's own ambivalent feelings towards her separation with Diego, but depicts and illustrates such inner conflict with the use of two Fridas, another semiotic concept we must discuss is that of *emotive function*. Emotive function is relevant when analyzing this painting because this more so focuses on the addresser, Frida Kahlo, and her own attitude towards the content of the message that is emphasized within this painting. As explained previously, because this painting pertains to how Frida felt after her and Diego had separated, Frida's own attitude towards what she was conveying through her portrayal of conflicting emotions is very much emphasized. That is, her feelings of longing and desperation for Diego as well as her feeling conflicted for having said feelings of longing and desperation, are clearly shown and depicted within the painting. Not only are her feelings of confliction and ambivalence for feeling the way she does towards the situation are prevalent, but it is shown in her choice of background of the painting. ((17)) states that "the clouds in the background imbue the scene with a sense of doom." Therefore, she also depicts that her attitude towards how she chose to portray her feelings also bring a sense of doom in addition to inner conflict. Provided below in figure 4 is an image of the painting, *The Two Fridas*.



Figure 4. *The Two Fridas* (1939)

Frida's Portrayal of Feminine and Masculine & Appropriations of Religious Iconography

Within this section, we are analyzing Frida's art after having analyzed a few of her works. More specifically, we are analyzing mainly how she portrays feminine and masculine within her art as well as appropriations of religious iconography. We will also be analyzing how her paintings tie semiotic concepts alongside with her portrayal of feminine and masculine, religious icons, and representations or references to religious iconography. Additionally, we are discussing semiotic concepts such as conative function [[3]], icon [[20]], oculusics [[32]], and semiosphere [[48]]. To discuss these semiotic concepts and about the portrayal of feminine, masculine, and appropriation of religious iconography, we are using ((4)), ((6)), and ((7)) as resources.

¶ I will write about the portrayal of feminine.

¶ I will write about the portrayal of masculine.

¶ I will write about the portrayal religious icons.

¶ I will write about relevant semiotic concepts illustrated within her portrayals and appropriations of feminine, masculine, and religious iconography.

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Conclusion

In this paper, I used semiotic concepts and related them to Frida Kahlo and her art to the best of my ability. I made sure to relate these particular semiotic ideas of significance to particular aspects of Frida Kahlo's life and art that is usually not often discussed. The particular semiotic concepts used for this paper can be seen in the following list:

- **Nonverbal communication**, more so pertaining to the figures used throughout Frida's artwork. **Kinesics**, **oculesics**, and **proxemics** were discussed as it related to the figures in Frida's art. Peirce's concepts of **firstness**, **secondness**, and **thirdness** were also used to describe elements within her paintings.
- **Culture**, as this has much to do with Frida as an individual, in politics, the feminist movement, and in the art world. This was discussed given Frida is **marked**, which causes her to differ from the other influential figures of her time and throughout history.
- **Connotation** and **denotation** were also used to distinguish between different elements and aspects of her paintings.
- **Paradigmatic and syntagmatic** dimensions were included to further analyze how figures and elements within her paintings interact and are placed.
- **Conceptual metaphor and metonym, context, icons, symbols, postmodernism**, and other significant semiotic concepts were included in order to further investigate Frida's works through a semiotic perspective. *Will elaborate more on in finalized version!*

Overall, this paper demonstrates how one might apply semiotic ideas to a topic such as Frida Kahlo and her artwork, a topic one might assume could have nothing to do with semiotics. By examining Frida's life and her art in a new perspective, this could potentially result and aid in a new and better understanding of her art and the concepts she uses within her art. This could bring us closer to not only understanding her artwork but also understanding her as an individual.