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

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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 are 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 “A Semiotic Analysis of *The Wounded Table* (1940),” heavily discusses the elements shown within the painting as well as the overall painting itself. Additionally, this section covers concepts such as conceptual metaphor, context, narrative, icon [[20]], semiosphere [[48]], syntagm [[61]], and other semiotic concepts.

The ninth section of this paper, titled “A Semiotic Analysis of *The Broken Column* (1944),” is the last section discussing a specific painting of Frida. This section, again discusses the painting itself, but it also covers concepts such as thirdness [[64]], conative function [[3]], natural sign [[31]], oculosics [[32]], and other semiotic concepts.

The tenth 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 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

I want to write about surrealism and provide a brief explanation of the art style given that the majority of Frida Kahlo's work is surrealist or contains surrealist elements and is mainly referred to as a surrealist painter/artist. **I plan to focus on** explaining what surrealism is, how Peirce's firstness, secondness, and thirdness is related to surrealism, and how context and connotation also tie into surrealism. **I would like my reader to** understand this explanation and discussion of surrealism given that this style of art is prevalent and integral to the five paintings we will be analyzing from Frida Kahlo.

¶ I will write a brief summary of what surrealism is.

¶ I will write about how Frida ties surrealism into her artworks and touch upon how it is shown within the five paintings we will be discussing.

¶ I will write about how firstness, secondness, and thirdness are related to surrealism.

¶ I will write about how connotation and denotation are related to surrealism.

Frida Kahlo: Creation of a Cultural Icon

I want to write about Frida Kahlo's early life and personal obstacles and hardships she's has to overcome in order to become the unique or "marked" woman we know her as today. **I plan to focus on** Frida's early life, upbringing, mental and physical health issues, and how those mental and physical health issues shaped her art style and herself as an individual. **I would like my reader to** gain a better understanding of Frida Kahlo as an individual and as an artist, and by doing so, my reader will have a better idea as to what they should expect when examining her art.

¶ I will write about Frida's early life and upbringing.

¶ I will write about a brief history of Frida's mental and physical health complications.

¶ I will write about how those mental and physical health issues shaped her art style and herself as an individual.

¶ I will write about how Frida is considered a marked individual and what makes a unique individual/artist.

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

I want to write about Frida's life, personal affairs, and relationships that have influenced her art. **I plan to focus on** influences such as relationships (with and not with Diego Rivera), her multiple miscarriages, and political ties with the communist party. **I would like my reader to** learn that these influences have not only inspired her art style, but have also contributed largely to the surrealist, personal, and intimate elements illustrated throughout all of her work.

- ¶ I will write about her relationships with Diego Rivera and others.
- ¶ I will write about her experience with multiple miscarriages.
- ¶ I will write about her political ties with the communist party.
- ¶ I will write about how her overall relationships and life experiences reflected onto her art.

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

I want to write about Frida's painting, *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932) and explain what goes on in the painting as well as analyzing it through a semiotics perspective. **I plan to focus on** the context, connotative meaning, conceptual metaphors, firstness, kinesics, narrative, and postmodernism aspects of the painting. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view this painting from a semiotic perspective.

- ¶ I will write about the overall painting and what kinds of elements she included within the painting.
- ¶ I will write about the context, and narrative of the painting.
- ¶ I will write about aspects of firstness, conceptual metaphors, and connotative meaning of the painting.
- ¶ I will write about elements of kinesics and postmodernism illustrated within the painting.

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

I want to write about Frida's painting, *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) and explain what goes on in the painting as well as analyzing it through a semiotics perspective. **I plan to focus on** its multiple symbolic representations and how diachronic, semiotics, presentational symbols, proxemics, and syntagmatic concepts are prevalent within this painting. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view this painting from a semiotic perspective with the help of understanding the relevant concepts.

- ¶ I will write about the painting's illustration of diachronic elements.
- ¶ I will write about the painting's symbolic representations and presentational symbols.
- ¶ I will write about the painting's illustration of proxemics.
- ¶ I will write about the painting's illustration of syntagmatic elements.

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

I want to write about Frida's painting, *The Two Fridas* (1939) and explain what goes on in the painting as well as analyzing the painting through a semiotics perspective. **I plan to focus on** how the painting ties semiotic concepts such as conceptual metaphors, conceptual metonym, context, and emotive function of the two Fridas within the painting. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view this painting from a semiotic perspective with the help of understanding the relevant concepts.

- ¶ I will write about context.
- ¶ I will write about conceptual metaphors.
- ¶ I will write about conceptual metonym.
- ¶ I will write about emotive function.

A Semiotic Analysis of *The Wounded Table* (1940)

I want to write about Frida's painting, *The Wounded Table* (1940) and explain what goes on in the painting as well as analyzing the painting through a semiotics perspective. **I plan to focus on** how the painting ties semiotic concepts such as context, conceptual metaphor, narrative, icon, semiosphere, and syntagm together with the painting itself. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view this painting from a semiotic perspective with the help of understanding the relevant concepts introduced within this section.

- ¶ I will write about context, narrative, and conceptual metaphor.
- ¶ I will write about icon.
- ¶ I will write about semiosphere.
- ¶ I will write about syntagm.

A Semiotic Analysis of *The Broken Column* (1944)

I want to write about Frida's painting, *The Broken Column* (1944) and explain what is occurring in the painting as well as analyzing it through a semiotics perspective. **I plan to focus on** how the painting ties semiotic concepts such as thirdness, conative function, natural sign, and oculesics together with the painting itself. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view this painting from a semiotic perspective with the help of understanding the relevant concepts introduced within this section.

- ¶ I will write about thirdness.
- ¶ I will write about conative function.
- ¶ I will write about natural sign.
- ¶ I will write about oculesics.

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

I want to write about Frida's art and mainly how she portrays feminine and masculine within her art as well as appropriations of religious iconography. **I plan to focus on** how the painting ties semiotic concepts as well as explaining her portrayal of feminine and masculine, religious icons, and representations or references to religious iconography, and other semiotic concepts covered in previous sections. **I would like my reader to** be able to analyze and view Frida's paintings from a semiotic perspective with the help of understanding the relevant concepts introduced within this section and previous ones .

The tenth 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 that have already been introduced and briefly talked about within the previous sections.

¶ 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.

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.