

EDWARD HOPPER NIGHTHAWKS CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This piece, Nighthawks was painted by Edward Hopper in 1942. Hopper was born in Nyack, New York in 1882, and is classed as the best painter of modern American life, painting amazing realism pieces of everyday life in cities, towns, villages and all sorts of surroundings. Hopper was a realist; he painted everyday scenes, one of his teachers, the artist Robert Henri, influenced Hopper to draw realistic depictions of urban life.

By 1899 he had already decided to become an artist, but his parents persuaded him to begin by studying commercial illustration, painting for posters, books and advertising, because this seemed to offer a more secure future. He first attended the New York School of Illustrating and then in 1900 transferred to the New York School of Art. When he left school Hopper became a commercial artist, designing posters, books and other advertising aids as his parents had wanted. At the age of 42 Hopper gave up this career, becoming a full time artist, leaving a secure, well paid job to do what he loved full time.

He was inspired by impressionists, especially their interest in light. You can tell the influence this had on his work when you look at any impressionists work, with the short brushstrokes and bright colours, and more importantly their representation of reflected light. Some areas of his work aren't as similar to Impressionist painters; Hopper used smooth looking brush strokes unlike the very visible, short strokes of impressionists. Hopper has a clear style; often showing interiors and exteriors and capturing one moment in time. He paints isolated people and vast spaces, with a contrast in colour and light in all his art.

Hopper's style is very distinctive; it has a recognisable 1920's era to it in the use of dress film and theatre which all feature in his work. The way he uses bright colours in contrast to dark scenes and the way he brings out both exteriors and interiors in his paintings is very well done and so is his use of space to create moods and atmospheres in his work. There are often very isolated figures in his paintings which leaves many questions about what they may be thinking or doing and what part they play in society.

Hopper was very successful in his lifetime which is unusual. He was liked by American critics who celebrated his work, and the public liked his work also. Edward Hopper was a very private man; he never gave interviews and lived a sheltered life away from the public eye. He died in 1967, aged 84, after a long life but a short career in which he produced a lot of work.

Nighthawks is oil on canvas, painted in 1942, during the end of the Great Depression, just before America's involvement in World War Two. Hopper began painting this just after the attack on Pearl Harbour and it portrays people sitting in a downtown diner late at night. It isn't just Hopper's most famous painting; it's also one of the most recognizable in American art. It can be found in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. The scene was inspired by a diner in Greenwich Village, Hopper's home neighbourhood in Manhattan. At the time he started to paint Nighthawks there was obviously an air of heavy heartedness, which I feel is translated into the faces of the subjects in the diner.

The title "Nighthawks" to me suggest that the people are like predators. They are out at night, on their own, quietly looking for something. This is a good name for the piece because the image can be interpreted so that all the people have their own story and reasons for being out so late at night. They are mysterious and the name fits the dark and strange mood of the painting. However, I interpret the name Nighthawks differently; I think of it that the people in the bar are just huge birds that should be out like predators, but are instead shut in and trapped by the world's insensitivity. The piece is highly finished, you cannot see any

brushstrokes and it looks too perfect to be a real painting. It is very much a realist painting, depicting a perfectly normal urban evening, easily recognisable as Hopper's work.

In the build up to his final pieces, Hopper produced a number of initial studies. These would be of a number of things; people, still life arrangements, different viewpoints of the same thing, and interiors and exteriors. After looking at all of these and planning the piece, he began his final composition which would include many of the things that he had previously drawn or painted. Hopper's work is very highly finished and completely planned out, making the final piece perfect.

The final composition shows an anonymous street, with the main focal point being the bar. This is clear because it is where Hopper has used light to portray four people. The figures in the image appear to be a barman, a man and woman sitting together, and another man sitting by himself. The way they are dressed suggests a 1920's theme, but it could also be influenced from the 1940's – 1950's gangster films that were so popular in America.

The intense brightness means that the people inside are exposed and vulnerable to the outside world and the preying eyes of passers by and the figures hunch their shoulders protectively. Hopper used himself as a model for both the seated men, suggesting he feels as though he is in the same situation as them. He modelled the woman, as he did all of his female characters, on his wife Jo. Hopper was a hard man to live with and was less emotionally attached to his wife than she was to him. From Jo's diaries we learn that Hopper described this work as a painting of just three characters. The man behind the counter is in fact free, and it is the other figures that are trapped. The question we ask ourselves is are the men there to prey on the woman, or has she come in to prey on the men?

The piece is separated into two different sections; to the right hand side is the artificially lit up bar, and to the left is the dark, empty street with a shadowy, sinister alley. The café does not look at all welcoming, in fact somewhat foreboding. There is no door in to the place and the people inside do not look at all jovial. The barman seems more separate to the other people in the bar, he has a job and we know clearly his place in society, unlike the others who are a mystery. The man and woman on the right seem to be together because of the position of their hands, but this could just be a trick of the light. If they are meant to be together then they are clearly unhappy, they seem to be detached and both thinking about different things. The other man in the image sits away from the others, with only the back of his head visible. He appears to be looking down; maybe he has only just finished work, in a job that he hates, explaining why he is subdued and possibly drowning his sorrows.

The café is definitely the subject of the painting, along with the people inside it. Despite the close proximity of the three seated figures, we still get a sense of isolation between them. We know that there is a specific reason why these people are out in the café; the fact that it is so late at night and deserted, when most people would normally be in bed, asleep. The people in the bar are not doing anything that suggests they are any different from anyone else; they are simply smoking and drinking. Perhaps they are just out because it's the end of work, or they are just relaxing, but you can't help thinking there is something abnormal.

The couple that are sitting with each other appear to be physically close but emotionally separate from one another. Their hand positions make them seem as if they are in fact in a relationship, but they are not speaking to each other and the woman seems almost bored, checking her fingernails. A possible reason for their separation is that the man is talking to the barman. When you look at their lines of sight, this seems a likely story. They could be having a conversation, explaining why the woman seems bored and not as close to her partner. The barman has no apparent significance to the painting; he is just there doing his

job and making conversation with the locals. The final figure in the scene is the man with his back to the audience's view, we cannot see his face and obviously this is a deliberate point made by Hopper. But why would we not want to see this man's face? Perhaps it is because he is simply unimportant, maybe it is to show that he is alone in the world, his eye line seems to be pointing straight down so perhaps he is trying to avoid contact and conversation with everybody else in the bar. Maybe his position is as far out as if he is a police officer undercover, spying on the man and woman who are wanted for a crime. I believe he is just another man in the bar though, with his own story.

I think that the person whose viewpoint this was painted from could be described as a nighthawk, looking in on the people as though they are prey and standing in the darkness while everyone else is fully exposed by the artificial light in the café.

Hopper's wife Jo wrote a diary about what it was like to live with him and in this she explains what Hopper truly thought the painting was about. He believes that there are only three key figures in the painting. They are, the couple sitting together and the barman. The barman though imprisoned in the triangular counter, is in fact free. He has a job, and a home, he can come and go as he pleases. Hopper says it is the customers who are the nighthawks. He writes, "Nighthawks are predators - but are the men there to prey on the woman, or has she come in to prey on the men? To my mind, the man and woman are a couple, as the position of their hands suggests, but they are a couple so lost in misery that they cannot communicate; they have nothing to give each other." So the barman and the couple are a complete contrast of being trapped and being free. Hopper then says "I see the nighthawks of the picture not so much as birds of prey, but simply as birds: great winged creatures that should be free in the sky, but instead are shut in, dazed and miserable, with their heads constantly banging against the glass of the world's callousness."

It is clear that Hopper is making a statement about American life at the time it was painted. He suggests that people blame others for their lack of success but it is in fact their fault. He hints at the untapped talent of human nature, by saying that people are "great winged creatures" that "are shut in". I think this suggests that Hopper is somewhat bitter towards people and blames them for the pain and suffering they endure.