LESSON PLANS

LIFE IN THE DEPRESSION

Grade Levels: 9–12
Estimated Time: 5 hours

Introduction:
Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (see page 59) depicts a farmer and his unmarried
dughter posed before a white house the artist had seen in the small Iowa town of Eldon.
The title of the painting is derived in part from the “Carpenter Gothic” style of the
house—the upper window resembles a pointed arch of the Gothic, or late medieval, era,
and by extension, the man and woman are “American Gothic” people, clinging to
traditional values.

The painting is one of the most famous works in the history of American art. It is an
example of Regionalism, a movement that featured depictions of rural American subjects
rendered in a realistic style. Some believe that Wood used this painting to satirize the
narrow-mindedness and repression that have been said to characterize Midwestern culture,
but Wood denied this interpretation. Whether the image should be read as a positive,
reassuring image of rural American values during a time of uncertainty or as an ambiguous
mixture of praise and satire remains a subject of debate.

The painting was completed during the early years of the Great Depression, a time
of unemployment, poverty, and hardship across America. Despite the serious expression
of the two subjects in the painting, little else in the picture indicates the problems or
issues surrounding the Depression. This lesson will focus on American life in the 1930s by
having students examine events and trends of the Depression era occurring beyond the
image shown in the painting. Students will be asked to determine the possible reactions
of the pair shown in *American Gothic* to the current affairs of their time, based on the manner
in which they are both portrayed in the painting. The activity will conclude with the
creation of a collective scrapbook of text and images about the Depression era, including
the painting *American Gothic*.

Lesson Objectives:
- Critically analyze Wood’s *American Gothic*, with attention to what the painting communicates
  about the values and priorities of its subjects and about the time period in which it
  was produced.
- Learn about the events of the Great Depression.
- Learn to conduct research using relevant books and Web sites.
Key Terms:
- Great Depression
- portraiture
- Regionalism
- Prohibition
- New Deal

Instructional Materials:
- pencils
- notebook paper
- drawing paper
- colored pens, colored pencils, or paint
- tape recorder
- books and Web sites on the Great Depression

- American Cultural History, 1930–39
  http://kalibrary.lonestar.edu/decade30.html
- Best of History Web Sites: Great Depression (includes lesson plans)
  http://www.besthistorysites.net/USHistory_GreatDepression.shtml
- The Hollywood Thirties
- Library of Congress (Great Depression and the 1930s)
  http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/97/depress/overview.html
- A New Deal for the Arts: American Federal Arts Projects
  http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/index.html
- New Deal Network
  http://newdeal.ford.org/
- Victoria & Albert Museum: Exploring Photography—Dorothea Lange
  http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/photography/photographer.php?photographerid=ph036&row=0
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Procedures:
Discussion:
• Using image 21 or the enclosed CD, have students view American Gothic closely and ask them to speculate on the personalities of the subjects and values they might hold. Have them consider questions such as these: Does the pair look content? Serious? Worried? Do they seem to be prosperous or subject to hard times? Do they appear to be hardworking or casual? What attitudes might they hold about issues such as morality, crime, or poverty? Ask students what they know of the Great Depression and if there are any indications of hardship or economic crisis in the painting.

Activity:
• Divide students into groups and have them do research individually using relevant history books (including American history texts), the timeline in this manual, and Web sites about facets of the Great Depression. Direct each group to research one of the following topics: the Dust Bowl, marathon dances, Hollywood films, gangsters (such as John Dillinger), the New Deal, and Prohibition.
• Have students summarize their research in single- or half-page reports and find at least one image to illustrate their respective topics. Images can be photocopied from books, downloaded from the Internet and printed, or created by students themselves in drawings or paintings based on images encountered in their research. Among many memorable images of the Great Depression are the photographs of victims of the Dust Bowl and poverty, both rural and urban, by Dorothea Lange.
• Assemble all of the reports and images, including a reproduction of American Gothic, to create a scrapbook or display entitled “Life in the Depression.” The final compilation may take the form of a scrapbook, a bulletin board display, or a digital presentation using a program such as PowerPoint in which text and images are inserted in a series of screens or pages. Have each group read or summarize their topic to provide a comprehensive overview of the era.
• Discuss with students the means by which people in the 1930s, like the pair in American Gothic, received news in the home. (Without television or the Internet, information came from newspapers, magazines and the radio.) Have students recreate a 1930s-style radio show with interviews or news reports related to the topics they have researched. Include as one segment an interview with the couple in American Gothic, which may cover their everyday lives or their views on some of the events or trends of the Great Depression. Have students collaborate on writing a script.

Follow-up:
Record the radio show on a tape recorder. If the technology is available, make a digital recording to post online as a podcast (or an “enhanced podcast” with images).
Evaluation:
Evaluate students based on their participation in the preliminary discussion; their ability to find appropriate research sources and to complete research on their topic; their success in retrieving appropriate images, or, if they produced original drawings or paintings, the quality of their artwork; and their ability to write their reports. Their creativity in scripting and/or performing the radio show should also be considered.

Illinois Learning Standards:
English Language Arts 3, 4, 5
Social Science: 15, 16, 18
Fine Arts: 25, 26, 27

For more detailed information on the Illinois Learning Standards, see http://www.isbe.state.il.us/lb/.