Diary

In the painting *Diary* by Norman Rockwell, a girl is shown resting on a pillow while writing in her diary. She is dressed like an adult who has just come from a night out, but is exhibiting child-like qualities and behavior. The conflicting use of mature and child-like props gives the image elements of incongruous humor.

It is difficult to determine the age of the girl in this painting. She is dressed in a long, elegant light green dress with a white fur coat to cover her arms and shoulders. She has a pair of silver high heels hanging off of her feet, her hair is styled, and it is obvious that she is wearing dark red lipstick. It appears that she has just returned from a formal dance of some kind. A major symbol giving this insight is the corsage lying on the floor near her feet. The make-up, hairstyle, dress, fur coat, and high heels all point toward the idea of this being a mature woman. The corsage on the floor suggests a possible boyfriend, which is another indication of maturity.

Something that seems out of place in this painting is the yellow circle around the girl’s head and upper body. This can be explained through one of the five stereotypes of women in the media: the Madonna. The Madonna stereotype is how, in certain media representations, the woman is made to look angelic. One of the ways this is done is by having some depiction of a halo around the woman’s head. This represents a truly good woman, one who often produces children and devotes herself to their care. In this painting, the yellow circle around the girl’s head and upper body is a way to represent the womanhood looming over her that is fast approaching.
Although she is encompassing many aspects of a mature woman, the girl in the painting is simultaneously exhibiting child-like behavior. The first noticeable aspect of her youth is the stuffed animal clutched beneath her right arm. Next is the fact that she is writing in a diary. Although it is not unusual for mature women to have a journal, it is unusual for mature women to have a diary, which is the term chosen for the title of the painting. Another suggestion of her youth is how she is blushing, giving off the feeling of child-like giddiness, and her body language is that of a child as well. She is sitting somewhat curled up, as many young girls would comfortably position themselves.

When looking at this painting it is important to recognize what is being held tight and what has been cast off. The stuffed animal is being held securely underneath her right arm, and her diary is held very close to her face. Her high heels, however, are unstrapped; one is hanging from her foot and the other has been completely cast off, along with the corsage. Even her fur coat is sliding off of her shoulder. This depicts her as attempting to hang on to her youth and casting aside her adult responsibilities.

This painting is humorous because it appeals to the humor theory of incongruity. Representing the girl up front as an adult and then adding in child-associated props throws the viewer off. These conflicting age symbols, such as the formal dress paired with the stuffed animal, elicit a feeling of amusement from viewers because they are not typically seen together; it’s incongruous.

It can be argued that the girl in this painting is growing up too fast. At first glance, this is an adult woman. The way she has her hair and make-up done is very mature, and suggests she has experience with it. Her dress and high heels are absolute signs of maturity. The yellow circle around her, a halo of sorts, represents her cross over into womanhood and her approaching
responsibilities of bearing children and taking care of a family. While all of this is fast approaching, it is clear that she’s not ready yet. She is still clutching tight on to her stuffed animal beneath her arm, and she is curling up like a child. She keeps her diary up close to her face and is blushing like a young child. She may think she’s ready for that cross over into womanhood, but it is clear she’s subconsciously holding on to her childhood tendencies.

This leads to the argument that she is actually growing up too slow; she’s lagging behind. She could be of age to start taking on a more mature lifestyle but is stuck in her youth. She doesn’t want to grow up because she doesn’t want to lose the comforts of her childhood. All of her adult features, the make-up, the hair, the heels, and the dress, could all be seen as a game of dress up for this girl; none of it is real. She’s being pushed into something she’s not ready for.

Women often take pieces of their childhood with them as they transition into adult lives, and there is nothing wrong with that. Perhaps the true message this painting is trying to convey is that there is no such thing as really growing up. No matter how old a woman gets, she is still a child at heart.
Works Cited