



# Learning to Like What You Loathe: A Six-Step Program

LISA KNOPP

IT'S AN ESSENTIAL life skill, learning to tolerate, perhaps even like, what you loathe. The following six steps will guide you through almost any situation in which you want or need to change your mind—like learning not to loathe okra, church organ music, futuristic or fantasy dramas like *Star Trek*, and *Game of Thrones* (the lone exception being *Outlander*), that likeable colleague's irritating mannerism, or evidence that you're aging. No matter what odious thing you pick, the program succeeds as long as you're committed to learning the process. But be advised that when you have ethical reasons for loathing something or someone—like the leader of a country who proves to be, time and again, immoral and incompetent—you'd be forsaking your principles and integrity by learning to tolerate what's just plain wrong. What to do with those feelings is the subject of another essay.

To illustrate the efficacy of The Learning-to-like-what-you-loathe Program (TLTLWYLP), I'll show you how it empowered me to change my attitude about Grant Wood's iconic painting, *American Gothic*. By freeing myself of those reactions, I can now devote the time and attention that I spent loathing and resisting it to other projects.

I don't remember when I first saw Wood's ubiquitous painting, but I'm pretty sure that even then, I didn't like it. In this double portrait, a prim-looking woman nearing middle age and a bespectacled man, decades her senior, stand

in front of a modest white house and a red barn. It's a close-cropped view, so you only see them from the waist up. They seem hemmed in. He's in overalls, a pajama shirt, and a dress jacket (who would wear that combination?) and he grips a three-pronged pitchfork with his right hand. Her blond hair is parted down the middle and pulled back. Her clothes—a brown print apron trimmed with white rickrack worn over a black dress with a high, thin white collar—are dark and dowdy. He looks at the viewer; she looks away. I don't see any heart, humor, or good will in this pair's long, dour faces. What dreary little lives they must have lived in that dreary little house. Yuck.

*Step 1. Define the problem by identifying the associations and biases that you've loaded onto the despised other. These are what trigger your feelings of loathing.*

Taste aversion can develop after ingesting something that makes you sick enough to vomit. It's a protective, albeit disproportionate, response, so that you'll never again eat the type of food that made you sick. But an aversion can also be associative, caused not by the object itself but by something contextual. Because of two childhood incidents, I used to associate the odor of cooking cabbage with poverty and meanness. Though I've long been a fan of sulfurous, rather bitter-tasting cruciferous vegetables, I couldn't bear eating cooked cabbage until I was almost an adult. But now, it's right up there with broccoli.

The main reason that I loathe Wood's well-executed painting is personal: I don't like people that look like them. They strike me as judgmental, self-denying, humorless, rigid, and dull. While much may have been thrust upon them, they had choices in how they responded to hardship. But becoming a woman who wears bright dresses and bobbed or flowing hair and who welcomes friends and strangers to her home or becoming a man who gives up the scowl and ditches the pitchfork because he rejects its connotations of hellfire and damnation, of all work and no play, may be every bit as challenging as learning to tolerate something one loathes.

Another reason I don't like the painting are the stereotypes it perpetuates about my home state. Yes, there are some glum, stodgy, sanctimonious people in Iowa. Yes, there are farms and towns with houses like this one. But Iowa has so much more. Like the caucuses and Iowans' high tendency for picking Democratic presidential nominees. Like a dynamic wind energy industry. Like

one of the oldest, most prestigious graduate creative writing programs in the country. Like the distinction of being the third state to allow gay marriage, after more liberal Massachusetts and Connecticut. *American Gothic* doesn't represent the Iowa I know and love, though it does represent a segment of the population that I also know but don't love.

I was born and raised in Burlington, a small industrial city on the Mississippi River, where the land is bluffy, wooded, and beautiful. We had three movie theaters, many restaurants, four hospitals, a Civic Music Association, a playhouse, and when I was a teenager, a hip jeans store and a head shop. My mother was a teacher; my father was a railroad boilermaker. Neither had ever lived nor worked on a farm. When I was in elementary school, my family took Sunday rides in the country so my grandmother, who didn't drive, could see the houses where people she knew or had known had lived, followed by a loop through the cemetery so she could see where most of those folks had come to reside. Their white clapboard houses, similar to that in *American Gothic*, surrounded by a few trees, outbuildings, and acres of beans and corn, turned my stomach. I felt sorry for those who lived in such places because unlike me, they had no near neighbors, no beautiful parks easily reached by bicycle, no buses to ride home from Saturday morning dancing lessons at the YWCA and visits to a library which held more good books than I could ever read, no place to find cover from the attention of others or to meet someone new.

When I was in college, my parents moved to an acreage surrounded by crops on three sides and a dairy farm on the fourth, so they could keep horses, sheep, geese, cats, and lots of dogs. I liked the idea of living in the country, yet the isolation and exposure made me anxious. During hay season, I suffered mightily from asthma and allergies. During the epic snowstorm of 1979, my family and I were housebound for so many days that we ran out of dogfood and alcohol. The nightmare ended when a neighbor showed up with his frontend loader and dug us out.

Wood explained that the house in which he'd positioned the father and daughter in his painting lived was in town (behind them rises a steeple) rather than the country. In my mind, small towns are as alienating as farms, though in different ways. They're too small for a long walk or bike ride or to offer you a moment of anonymity or real choice if you wanted a new dress. One's aging and immortality is harder to deny or forget in a small town, since you're in

frequent contact with others who entered and graduated from the same school, had babies, and joined AARP about the same time that you did.

When I was in college, I worked at the Casey's General Store in New London, Iowa, located halfway between Mount Pleasant where I went to college, and Burlington where I lived. Some who came in to buy gas, cigarettes, beer, or burritos hung around to gossip about the others who came in to buy gas, cigarettes, beer, or burritos. Night after night, teenagers drove Highway 34 back and forth between New London and Danville, fleeing only to return. When my co-worker and I locked up and counted the money at 11 PM, the cop that the two towns shared waited in the parking lot in his cruiser until we were safely in our cars. I was both comforted and rattled by this.

In 1991, Carl E. Smith donated the Dibble house to the Iowa State Historical Society, which restored it to its 1930 condition. Seventy-seven miles separated my hometown from Eldon, but I never went there. Nor did anyone I knew. Perhaps they felt about the couple, the house, and the stereotypes as I did.

*2. Because you're more likely to be comfortable with that which you frequently encounter, gradually increase your exposure to the object of your loathing. When nausea, headaches, heart palpitations, asthma, or other symptoms arise, don't retreat! Be mindful and breathe deeply and evenly until they pass. In time, you will be less reactive.*

Even if I was given the original painting with Wood's actual brush strokes and fingerprints, I wouldn't want it hanging in my house. The father's censorious gaze would follow me, and the daughter would remind me of my close call. (When I graduated from college, I was offered two high school teaching positions, one in a town of 959 people thirty miles from home and one in far-away Omaha, then home to about one-half million people. I took the latter.) Nonetheless, I buy the print.

To ensure enough contact with the object of my loathing, I considered hanging the painting in the garage where I'd see it every time I drove into and out of there—too often. I considered hanging it in the bedroom that my daughter uses only at the holidays, and I keep closed against the cats the rest of the time. I enter that room once a week or so to water the plants and check my clothes in

her full-length mirror – not often enough for this lesson. Instead, I tacked the print to a wall in the laundry room. It's a weird placement, I know. But between doing laundry and scooping the litter box, I'm in there at least once each day, ample opportunity to work TLTLWYLP without overdoing it.

At first, I noticed what isn't there. As I loaded or unloaded the washing machine, I wondered why the couple weren't smiling. Serious expressions were standard in older portraits, but from the 1920s on, smiling was becoming the norm. Perhaps they had nothing to smile about. Or perhaps they were real cut-ups, the life of the party but were so determined to do everything right in their gig as art models that they appear grim and harsh. I wanted to peek behind the house to see if there was an automobile or cabbage patch, though what I hoped for was a hammock in which one could pass a dreamy hour or two. The couple hadn't personalized their porches with wicker furniture, a cushioned swing, a cat curled up on a rug, a wreath on the door. All that's there are a begonia and a sturdy sansevieria. Cats may have lived in the barn, but I doubted if these sourpusses fed and played with them. When it occurred to me that this couple might be the type that drown kittens, my stomach churned. I breathed deeply. Once my stomach settled, I noticed what was there. Like that three-pronged pitchfork at the center of the painting. My garden pitchfork has four prongs. A trident is part of a cheesy, store-bought Halloween Satan costume, while a bident is part of a more imaginative, homemade Hades or Pluto costume. The tines of the pitchfork that the man grasps in his enormous right hand align with the vertical blue stripes on his shirt, the edges of his black jacket, and the siding on the house. Is he ready to pitch hay or is he protecting himself and the woman and if so, from what? Capitalism run amok? Creeping communism? A woman in the state legislature? Dust storms? A local crime wave? New-fangled frozen foods? The swains eyeing the hottie at his side? The dark fuzz atop his domed, bald head links it with the dark, shingle-covered pointed roof. Beneath his chin hangs loose flesh. I want to stare him down or chuck his chin until he blushes or giggles.

The woman's complexion is pale, clear, and slightly rosy. Her smooth golden head links with the trees, round yellow-green balls, behind her house. Her brown apron and black dress can't hide the flatness of her chest. Only a turtle-neck would cover more of her long neck. At her clavicle is a burnt orange cameo brooch bearing the image of a woman's head in cream. The brooch,

rickrack, and gold button at the man's neck (maybe this isn't a pajama shirt), are the only indulgences; the barn and brooch are the only standout colors.

Is this couple rigid or resolute? Static and self-conscious or calm and self-contained? What's that look on her face? Petulance? Stoicism? Worry? Perplexity? Suspicion? He seems firmly planted while she seems ready to bolt—toward or away from, I can't say. The front room shades are pulled. What might this couple be hiding or hiding from?

The woman won't meet my gaze. Perhaps she's distracted or rebellious. Either way, I'd like to teach her the six steps so she could learn to like the town, the house, the man next to her, her life, herself.

3. *To create new associations with which to replace your triggers (see step 1), add something pleasing to what you loathe or alter one or more of the existing features. Your revisions may be fitting, contrary, playful, or absurd.*

You might find okra, with its slimy, bristly, fibrous texture, palatable if you slice it and cook it with tomato, hot peppers, and a little sugar and salt. Gradually, you can decrease the amount of the mucous-thinning tomato mixture so that eventually, you're not only tolerating but actually liking plain, steamed, slimy, okra pods.

There are various ways to add a spicy sauce, so to speak, to *American Gothic*. You could deface it (or spruce it up!) by drawing smiles on the couple's faces. You could draw a string of Chinese lanterns on the porch or hang a Weimar Republic flag in the Gothic window. You could paint the house peach or draw a child's face at the door. You could replace the pitchfork with a tennis racket, beer stein, lily, trombone, falcon, spatula, fishing pole, Orange Nehi Soda, or the rake that Wood originally intended. Each of these props would change your view of the man for the better.

You can also change your associations with the setting. Wood advised as much when he wrote in the December 21, 1930 *Des Moines Register* that the couple in *American Gothic* "are American . . . and it is unfair to localize them to Iowa." Once you realize that, you can associate the virtue, hard work, practicality, and order that the couple represent with working class people everywhere—Maine, Oregon, Texas. You can also change the story you associate with the painting, so that it's not about some random couple. In *Grant Wood: A Life*,

R. Tripp Evans writes that this couple suggests “the long-suffering nature of [Wood’s] mother, and the confrontational personality of his father.” Maryville, who died when Grant was ten, preferred history and science to art and fiction and wanted his son to be a farmer. He was often disappointed by his second son’s arty disobedience. Hattie, with whom Wood lived with until her death in 1935 (thereafter, he was briefly married to a woman seven years his senior), encouraged her son’s artistic endeavors.

It’s in the story of the female model that I find the associations with the greatest power to change my mind about the painting. Nan Wood was born on a small farm near Anamosa (then population 2,600) in 1899, when Grant was eight. Following Maryville’s death in 1901, Hattie sold the farm and moved her four children to Cedar Rapids, ten times the size of Anamosa. They were poor, so Grant worked odd jobs to help out. When Hattie sold her house to pay her debts in 1916, Grant built a one-room, unheated shack where he, Hattie, and Nan spent a cold winter. Then, Grant and a friend built two bungalows and the Woods moved into one of them.

On August 1, 1924, one-month before her brother’s return from art studies in Europe, Nan, a secretarial school graduate, married Emmett Edward Graham at the courthouse. Evans says that the haste, timing, and surprise of her wedding suggest that it might have been Nan’s way of punishing her brother, with whom she was quite close, for going so far away and for so long. Nan’s husband, a former Georgian, worked in the Rock Island Line machine shops in Cedar Rapids, as Wood once had, though Wikipedia identifies him as a real estate broker and investor. His three children from an earlier marriage lived with foster parents. In 1925, Ed Graham was treated for tuberculosis at Oakdale Sanitarium in Iowa City (Nan would be treated there for TB four years later). It makes sense that while Ed was away, Nan would live with her brother and mother at 5 Turner Alley, the apartment over a funeral parlor carriage house into which they had moved in 1924. But she lived with them more than just then. In 1935, the Grahams moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, eventually settling in California. Ed died in 1967 when he was 71, Nan in 1990 at 91. They didn’t have children together.

Nan Wood Graham devoted herself to caring for her brother even after his death from pancreatic cancer in 1942. As the guardian and preserver of his image and legacy, she compiled eighteen scrapbooks filled with letters, postcards,

photographs, newspaper clippings, and ephemera about his career and which are now part of the Figge Art Museum's Grant Wood Archive in Davenport. After selling her brother's Iowa City house in 1942 (he left everything to her), Graham planned to reconstruct it in California and live there, a plan which never came to fruition.

After Wood's death, Graham burned his letters and wouldn't allow an authorized biography to be written about him (she rejected seven requests), as each fell short of the hagiography that she insisted upon. She brought defamation suits against *Playboy* and *Hustler* magazines for publishing what she considered to be indecent parodies of *American Gothic*. (She won a small settlement against *Playboy*, but lost her case against *Hustler*, since the judge ruled that the depiction was a parody and so, not to be taken seriously.) Her glowing tribute, *My Brother, Grant Wood*, was published in 1993.

Though the woman in *American Gothic* looks like she wants to escape her stifling life, Graham's role in one of the world's most famous paintings gave her fame and purpose. She remarked that if her brother had chosen another model, she'd be remembered as nothing more than "the world's worst stenographer." But, as she's quoted as saying in her *New York Times* obituary, "Grant made a personality out of me. I would have had a very drab life without it."

The painting was more than just her ticket out. Evans says that while Wood was uncomfortable with the fame that *American Gothic* brought him, his sister relished being the *American Gothic* woman or as she referred to herself, "the American Mona Lisa." Often, she dressed as if she was in the same era as the woman in the painting and posed by the painting or the Eldon house many times for photographers. Evans suggests that Graham's ability to become the woman in the painting was "almost like a creepy story of adopted identity."

4. *You can change the meaning you make of a situation by reframing it. Take a cue from Grant Wood who said, "I had to go to France to appreciate Iowa. That was the best way to get perspective."*

If I were from, say, Boston or Tucson and knew little about the center of the country, I might assume that this painting accurately represented Iowa farmers and farm-town dwellers in the late 1920s. Or, I might assume that Wood was using satire to expose and ridicule the undesirable traits and tendencies of com-



mon people in the middle of the country. If I were from, Boston or Tucson, I wouldn't see this painting as an affront to where I'm from and those who made me, as some Midwesterners do. If I were from Boston or Tucson or if I identified the scene with some place other than Iowa, I doubt that I would loathe it. Wood offered some help in how to understand his painting. When the November 16, 1930 *Des Moines Register* referred to it as *An Iowa Farmer and His Wife*, some Iowans were outraged at the associations between farmers and this unappealing couple and said so. Wood addressed the sloppy mistake in a frontpage article in the *Register* in which he explained that the couple weren't farmers but small-town residents. Though he identified them as father and daughter, later, he'd claim they were husband and wife.

According to Graham, some Iowans wrote "pretty mean letters" to the *Register* – letters that targeted her but never the man in the painting. One said that "if young men believed that farm women actually looked like the woman in *American Gothic*, then all the young men in Iowa would avoid farming and take up bootlegging." Another said that the painting "should be hung in a cheese factory" because "that woman's face would sour milk!" Yet, another identified the woman in the painting as the "missing link" between apes and humans. Needless to say, if offended Iowans had worked TLTLWYLP, they wouldn't have harassed Graham and Wood.

"In general, I have found, the people who resent the painting are those who feel that they themselves resemble the portrayals," Wood wrote in response to a 1941 letter he'd received. One of the fruits of working TLTLWYLP is that I can now admit that my dislike of the painting is due, in part, to my awareness that the couple and I have things in common. If I'd taught at the high school in the tiny Iowa town and lived with my parents for a short or long while, I might have become that milk-souring woman. When my children, convenience, or security are threatened or when I encounter political or religious beliefs that are just plain wrong, I, too, glare at the offender and thump the ground with my pitchfork.

In *Grant Wood: The Regionalist's Vision*, Wanda Corn wrote, "By and large, the farther a critic lived from the Midwest, the more predisposed he or she was to read the painting as satire or social criticism." In fact, critics in the early 1930s, thought Wood was doing in his painting what H. L. Mencken was attempting in his essays and Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson in their

novels: satirizing Midwestern conformity, pretention, narrow-mindedness, and moralism.

Wood acknowledged that there was satire in *American Gothic*, “but only as there is satire in any realistic statement,” a perplexing comment. Satire exposes in order to cause change. For instance, Jonathan Swift’s famous “modest proposal,” published in 1729, recommends that the Irish sell their fattened babies as “a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food,” to absentee landlords, “who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.” Swift’s intent was to stop England’s economic exploitation of the Irish, though not all readers realized that (the danger with satire, of course, is that some take it literally). But Wood’s target is neither clear nor focused. Is it the dark side of American individualism? Those Midwesterners whose puritanical values made Wood, an allegedly closeted homosexual, feel fearful and restricted, values that he saw in the father’s condemnatory glare? Or was he targeting those who held ignorant, outdated images of Midwesterners by giving them an exaggerated version of what they expected, both in his art and his life? To protect himself from homophobes and elitists, Wood wore bib overalls, adopted a jokey, hayseed persona, and allied himself with protective women.

Another reframing comes by focusing on the brooch Wood brought Hattie from Italy. She wears it in her son’s 1929 portrait of her, *Woman with Plants*, and Graham wears it in *American Gothic*. The brooch bears the image of the mythical Persephone, with flowers adorning her long, curly tendrils. While Persephone was picking flowers, Hades, her uncle and the god of the underworld, abducted her. Once back home, he raped and married her. Several critics have seen the woman in Wood’s painting as Persephone and the man as Hades, whose counterparts are the bident-bearing Pluto of Latin mythology and the pitchfork-bearing, pop culture version of the Biblical Satan. The man, perhaps the woman’s widowed father for whom she gave up a career, a family of her own, or both so that she could cook and keep house for him, is her captor and so, *American Gothic* tells a captivity tale. Evans sees family dysfunction in this scene and makes much of the closed windows and curtains. “Family secrets, dead bodies, incest, and murder all haunt this work, and they enter the painting here.” (While this is a leap too far for me, I admit that I find either of the couple’s possible relationships—father and daughter, husband and wife—rather disturbing.) The woman looks furtively for a way out. If she blinks twice, I’m going in after her.

Yet another reframing occurs if you see this painting as an expression of Midwestern regionalism, a literary and artistic movement in the 1930s of which Wood was a prominent spokesperson. During the Great Depression, the American Regionalists abandoned European themes and philosophies and embraced their homeplaces as their subjects. Regionalist works such as Thomas Hart Benton's working-class heroes and John Steuart Curry's depictions of historical events and natural disasters were figurative, representational, and narrative. Because the intent of Regionalist artists was clear, their works appealed to wide audiences.

In his 1935 essay, "Revolt Against the City," Wood set forth the basic ideals of the regionalist movement. Each part of the country, he wrote, "has a personality of its own, in physiography, industry, psychology. Thinking painters and writers who have passed their formative years in these regions will, by care-taking analysis, work out and interpret in their productions these varying personalities." Just as Gothic architecture grew out of competition between different French towns, when "different regions develop characteristics of their own, they will come into competition with each other; and out of this competition a rich American culture will grow." Wood defended regionalism from charges that it was simplistic, sentimental, provincial, and reactionary. The "true regionalist," he said, is "no mere eulogist: he may even be a severe critic."

Corn, who insists that *American Gothic* isn't satire but an expression of Wood's regionalist philosophy, nicely captures his ability to be both eulogist and critic:

In the 1920s, indeed, many Americans often thought of the farmer as a 'hayseed' or 'hick,' fortifying the belief that the nation's breadbasket had no history of any interest or consequence. Wood thought otherwise. In *American Gothic*, he honored those anonymous Midwestern men and women who tamed the prairie, built the towns, and created America's 'fertile crescent' -- and who, in the process, became insular, set in their ways, and fiercely devoted to home and land.

Wood asks that we see both the praise and the critique in his painting.

*5. Instead of avoiding or denying what you loathe, do the opposite: become an expert about all or part of it. But delay full immersion in what you loathe until you're advanced enough in your cognitive restructuring that you no longer have overpowering somatic responses to it.*

With all that Iowa has to offer, why did Wood pick this subject matter? And why did this unappealing couple and scene become so famous?

In August 1930, Wood taught a painting class and attended an art exhibition in Eldon. While there, he noticed a “cottage,” as he called it, that was a fine example of Carpenter Gothic, with its steeply pitched roofs, board and batten siding, and arched windows. This was an architectural style he’d seen on other Iowa farms and in which he saw a very distinctive American quality. But what struck Wood was the “pretentiousness” of the Gothic windows in this house, as if this quickly, cheaply manufactured, common abode was a magnificent, medieval cathedral. He received permission from the owners to sit in their yard and sketch their house on oil board. He left Eldon with his sketch and never returned.

Wood thought the house with the eccentric windows would be the ideal background for a portrait of a woman and a rake-holding man. (I, too, have been so taken by a single detail, say, a loose strand of hair, that I’ve sought a vehicle through which I could present and reflect upon that arresting feature.) For Wood’s contrived scene, he sought two people who could model the uptight, narrow-minded characters that he felt belonged to such a home. “I finally induced my own maiden sister [actually, she’d been married for six years] to pose and had her comb her hair straight down her ears, with a severely plain part in the middle.” In a personal statement by “Mrs. E. E. Graham” published in the December 1, 1930 *Des Moines Sunday Register*, Nan wrote that when “Mr. Grant Wood” asked her to pose, he showed her photographs of stone carvings in a Gothic cathedral and asked if she could “pull [her] face out long like some of the women in the carvings.” Graham told him that some of their neighbors looked that way naturally, but he was afraid that he’d hurt their feelings if he asked them to pose, so she consented. Next, Wood found his male model in Bryon H. McKeeby, his 62-year-old dentist and friend. McKeeby was a stylish, humorous man. Like Graham, he had to be coaxed to pose.

Wood outfitted his models so they looked to be of the same era as the fifty-year-old house. This meant that they weren’t survivors of the Roaring Twenties, but as Corn calls them, “Victorian survivals,” which is the title of Wood’s portrait of his austere, forbidding great aunt Matilda. Both Wood and Graham claim to have ordered from the Sears & Roebuck catalog the old-fashioned, colonial print apron that she wore and the overalls that McKeeby wore. Since

rickrack was out of style, Graham removed some from Hattie's dresses and sewed it to the apron. For McKeeby's costume, Wood used an often-laundered shirt with a missing collar that he found in his painting ragbag. He borrowed Maryville's glasses and Hattie's brooch. Then, he posed the couple, relics, really, so that they had the stiff, unsmiling demeanor demanded by long-exposure photographs of the 19th century.

Wood painted the house and models in separate sessions—Graham in the apartment he shared with her; McKeeby in his dental office. He promised both that he'd thin and elongate their faces, especially Graham's, just as he elongated the pointed arch on the Gothic window and steepened the roof. But these alterations weren't enough. Both models, especially McKeeby, were readily recognized. McKeeby was furious and long denied that he was the model for the forbidding man in the painting. He especially disliked it when his patients asked if he'd be using his pitchfork in their dental treatment. Wood's relationship with his dentist and friend was never the same.

Wood may have suspected that his painting would create a stir at the Iowa State Fair fine arts show, which was especially popular among farm families who wanted to see something other than pigs and poultry when they went to Des Moines. Instead, he entered his masterpiece in the Art Institute of Chicago's 43rd annual juried open exhibition of painting and sculpture that fall. When the prize selection committee rejected his submission, a juror who was also a trustee, persuaded the other jurors to reconsider. Wood won the Norman Wait Harris Bronze Medal and \$300 (about \$5,050.56 in 2022). The painting was an instant success, and a patrons' club purchased it for the Institute's permanent collection. Soon, reproductions of *American Gothic* hung in homes across the country and rickrack was back in style.

Initially, non-Iowans tended to see this painting as satirizing farmers and Midwestern values. But a few years later in the depths of the Depression, people saw it as a celebration of hard work, fortitude, self-sufficiency, and virtue — just what they needed in a time of burgeoning unemployment, shrinking farm incomes, and environmental disasters. With the end of the Depression and the raging war in Europe, the nation turned its attention from domestic to foreign enemies and battles. And, too, in 1940s, the art world turned from realism and regionalism to abstract expressionism. When Wood died in 1942, his paintings had fallen out of favor because of their resemblance to Hitler-approved,

social realist style propaganda, with its celebration of volk und vaterland and strapping, blond bodies. (While the couple in Wood's painting argues against the superiority of the Herrenrasse, even so, I must pause here for deep, slow measured breathing until my nausea abates.)

In the late 1950s, interest in *American Gothic* revived, as seen through caricatures, parodies, and lampoons. Next to DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, Wood's painting is probably the world's most parodied artwork, which is why it's so hard to really see it. My first exposure to the painting was probably the parody of it in a 1963 General Mills Country Corn Flakes commercial featuring a couple dressed like Graham and McKeeby singing lyrics that I still remember ("they won't wilt, when you pour on milk") to the tune of "This Land is Your Land," a rubber band twanging. Other parodies I remember include such couples standing in front of the Eldon house (or something like it) as Lisa and Oliver Douglas in the opening credits of *Green Acres*; Ronald and Nancy; Marge and Homer; Beavis and Buttthead; Barack and Michelle; Dwight and Angela; Hillary and Donald. During the summer of 2020, I saw a parody in which the couple wore N-95 masks, while ignoring social distancing; in another, the man holds a sign bearing the clenched black fist of the Black Lives Matter logo and the words, "It's not okay, boomer." And, too, the image of this couple has been used to sell just about everything from a Big Mac stuck on a pitchfork tine to his and hers car seat covers.

Wood felt so badly about the criticism that Graham endured that he sought to make it up to her by painting *Portrait of Nan*, in which she's elegant, feminine, aloof. She sits in an ornate Hitchcock chair before a plum-purple wall and a dark green drape. In her right hand, she presents a ripe plum; in her left, she cups a chick the color of her yellow, marcelled waves. She wears a sleeveless white blouse with black polka dots; the ties on her shoulders are pretty, black birds alighting. In contrast to her sideways glance in *American Gothic*, here she gazes directly at the viewer. And yet, her expression is equally inscrutable. I'd hang this painting in my dining room.

*6. Fall in love with what you loathe—or at least some aspect of it. Watch love change you, the other, and the world around you.*

One day when I rose from scooping poop from the cat litter box, I noticed something in Wood's painting I'd never seen before: a curly tendril behind the

woman's right ear, almost the length of her long neck. Suddenly, she looked years younger. How had I never noticed this ringlet before?

Had it been Graham's idea to let the lock of hair escape or was it, as Wood claims in a 1941 letter, his idea in order to "to show that she was, after all, human"? Some commentators see evidence in this loose strand of Persephone's ravishing by Hades, another leap too far for me. But I can say that its presence undermines so much in this hard-edged, too tidy scene – like the woman's grim countenance and her sidelong glance. Indeed because of this wayward curl, she appears more complex, vulnerable, and powerful than I'd once thought. Now, it's not the pitchfork or the man's gaze, but her tendril that I see first. Now I'd refuse to teach her TLTLWYLP if it meant her learning to tolerate the intolerable, as it's never beneficial to change your mind about what you know to be wrong and spirit-killing. But I would teach her the program if it meant she'd stop loathing her own desires and become a woman who wears her hair bobbed or flowing with bright dresses or even trousers, and who welcomes friends and strangers into her life.

I imagine the woman in front of the mirror combing her hair into a bun. While pulling that tendril loose, she dreams of wearing a shimmering, rose-gold, V-neck dress and shoes with embroidered toes and delicate straps for a night out at the hotel ballroom in nearby Ottumwa. Or I imagine her in that shiny dress, fixing her hair so that it's as full and luscious as Persephone's for an evening with a man, woman, friends, or alone (it doesn't matter which, as long as she steps lightly and has reasons to smile). That tendril is a bud of hopefulness. She will not be stuck in front of that Gothic house forever.

I take the print of *American Gothic* from the laundry room wall and carry it to my office. There I remove the stunning framed photograph of bright Mexican masks against a black background hanging over my desk and replace it with the print of the painting that I no longer loathe.