

DECODING EMOTIONAL TURMOIL: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF MALE AND FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN PAINTINGS

Ayesha Imran

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad

Email Id: ayeshaimran00000@gmail.com

Ifrah Fatima

Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad
(Corresponding Author)

Email Id: ifrahfatima.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

Esha Javed

MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad

Email Id: eshajaved2852002@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the gendered representation of emotional turmoil in paintings through a semiotic lens. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, the study has analyzed four artworks—two featuring female figures and two male—to understand how emotional distress is visually constructed across gender lines. The ideational, interpersonal, and compositional metafunctions guided the analysis, focusing on elements such as posture, gaze, spatial arrangement, and symbolism. Findings reveal distinct patterns: female figures are often portrayed as emotionally fragmented, inward-facing, and visually constrained, while male figures are depicted with existential solitude or active engagement, signaling agency and resolution. These contrasting portrayals reflect broader societal narratives about gender, emotion, and vulnerability. By combining visual grammar with gender analysis, the study demonstrates how art communicates complex emotional and cultural meanings. It highlights the importance of semiotic methods in interpreting visual representations and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gender influences the way emotional experiences are framed in artistic expression.

Keywords: Semiotic Analysis, Emotional Turmoil, Ideational Metafunction, Interpersonal Metafunction, Compositional Metafunction.

Introduction

Background of the Study

The depiction of emotion in art has fascinated researchers throughout the centuries because it is a subjective depiction by the artist and expression of mass-scale cultural and social processes. Emotional turmoil, in fact, is an imagery which artists throughout centuries have battled with, usually with the intent to convey the dynamics of human psychology in their art. Paintings, through the ability to express subtle meaning in terms of what can be seen such as composition, color, and symbolism, offer a unique platform upon which the representation of emotion can be examined. This research considered the representation of emotional suffering in male and female subjects and attempted to understand how visual art portrays emotional disorganization and how gender features in portraying it. By learning the aesthetic characteristics in these depictions, the study attempts to find the cultural stories and visual metaphors in these paintings.

Complementing this research is the usage of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotic model, which offers a formal explanation of the analysis of meaning-making in visual texts. The model constructs images of the visual as multifaceted systems of signs in which every component plays a particular communicative role. Using the ideational metafunction, the research explains how symbolic and cultural meaning is conveyed through the characters and

their interaction in the painting. The interpersonal metafunction addresses how the viewer interacts with the painting based on such factors of gaze, distance, and point of view, as instigate a viewing relationship between viewer and subject. Lastly, the compositional metafunction addresses the structuring and prominence of visual features to draw the viewer's interpretation, considering the role of prominence, balance, and spatial structuring. The research employs this model to analyze the various levels of meaning that are involved in the communication of emotional pain. This study takes into account wider gendered and cultural contexts to inform the visual depiction of the male and female figures in art. Historically, visual depictions of women and men have complied with stereotypes, with the male figures typically linked to virtues of reason, strength, and emotional control, and the females more emotively expressive, sensitive, or introspective. Such presumptions have deep roots in cultural and social beliefs, and they inform the visual presentation of emotional suffering in art throughout periods and styles. This study attempts to outline the cultural codes, symbolic motifs, and semiotic patterns that require the visual strategies to depict male and female figures in emotional suffering. Its purpose is to contribute to the understanding of how art visually depicts and enforces gendered ideas of emotional expression through visual communication.

Statement of the Problem

The visual construction of emotional distress is inextricably intertwined with cultural and social schemata, most notably those of gender. As the field of semiotics and visual studies expands, it is clear there is a gap in assessing how men's emotional distress and women's emotional distress are represented differently in paintings, and how the semiotic resources are used to make these distinctions. This gap diminishes our understanding of how art represents and constructs cultural knowledge of emotion and gender. Utilizing the social semiotic model of Kress and van Leeuwen, this study fills the gap by comparing and assessing the semiotic encoding of male and female subjects' emotional distress in paintings.

Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives:

1. To identify the semiotic elements used to represent emotional turmoil in paintings of males and females
2. To analyze the crucial semiotic differences in the portrayal of emotional turmoil between males and females

Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. How is emotional turmoil visually depicted in male and female paintings?
2. What are the crucial semiotic differences in the portrayal of emotional turmoil between males and females?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant as it is interdisciplinary in its approach, synthesizing semiotics, visual art criticism, and gender studies to analyze the representation of emotional suffering in painting. Through the use of Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic theory, the work provides close analysis of the visual grammar used to represent gendered emotional experience and the ways in which cultural norms and social expectations influence artistic representation of male and female bodies. It is of particular importance because it fills a gap in extant literature, where the

intersection of emotional representation and gender in art has consistently been overlooked or oversimplified. Through demystifying the semiotic processes behind such representations, the research not only deepens understanding of the relationship between art, culture, and emotion but also contests ingrained stereotypes constricting the range of emotional expression by gender. Furthermore, this research has implications for the production and evaluation of visual media and encourages artists, educators, and cultural critics to think about more representative and inclusive articulations of emotional experience. Finally, the research encourages critical analysis of the role of art in the construction of social attitudes toward gender and emotion, and calls for a more equitable and nuanced understanding of human experience across cultural and artistic contexts.

Delimitation

This research is delimited to the examination of four paintings, two representing female emotional distress and two representing male emotional distress, to offer a richly qualitative analysis using the social semiotic model of Kress and van Leeuwen. It is also delimited to just visual grammar of emotional distress in paintings and no other visual forms of art or modes of semiotic, for instance, verbal or audio. The limited sample size ensures intensive examination but limits generalizability. Further research could extrapolate these results to examine emotional distress in other media, for instance, photography or film, or compare representation across a range of cultural contexts, or examine the intersectionality of gender with variables such as age or ethnicity. This research lays the foundations for further large-scale research into the representation and subversion of societal norms by art and can inform semiotic, artistic, and gender debate.

Literature Review

O'Toole (1994, 2011) made a close study of Pieter Bruegel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and W.H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux-Arts*, based on the painting. His aim was to determine whether Bruegel's systemic decisions in his painting—about representational, modal, and compositional functions—could meaningfully be compared to the systemic lexicogrammatical decisions Auden used in his poem. Applying Halliday's model of the three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and compositional), O'Toole attempted to make correspondences between the way visual and linguistic systems operate to deliver meaning. For example, Bruegel's representational decisions in presenting the everyday realities of peasants' everyday life as background to Icarus's mythic fall are paralleled by Auden's linguistic emphasis on the everydayness of human existence in the face of tragic events. Through comparative study of these layers, O'Toole demonstrated the way the integration of semiotic and linguistic models provides greater understanding of cross-modal meaning-making processes, illustrating the manner in which visual and compositional features support each other in their narrative.

Tuckwell (2009) also studied this semiotic mode interaction, examining Kenneth Slessor's poem *Five Bells* and John Olsen's artwork *Salute to Five Bells*. Olsen's artwork was a response to Slessor's poem, and Tuckwell wished to show how the results of a systemic-functional analysis would exhibit the shared features of meaning-making in these two distinct modes of expression. The research illustrated how the poem and painting employed regular features in the three metafunctions—regular motifs, a peace rhythm, and an aura of order substructure. These regularities, Tuckwell asserted, give rise to a common sense of feeling, allowing reader and viewer to feel safe and at peace. The investigation targeted how semiotic analysis could reveal richer, more abstract relationships between literary and visual texts, more precisely in their potential for producing emotion through common strategies of composition. In further attempts

to illustrate the applicability of the Systemic-Functional model as a vehicle to examine visual paintings, O'Toole conducted a sequence of close readings of well-known paintings. For instance, he wrote of Botticelli's *Primavera* and Sir Russell Drysdale's *The Gatekeeper's Wife* (1994, 2011), and explained how the artists' systemic choices lead to the final communicative function of the works. In a second reading, O'Toole (2008) discussed René Magritte's painting *The Human Condition* and analyzed how the artist's visual reasoning and employment of incongruity constructs an understanding of reality. The artist's use of congruence through systematic refusal of ordinary visual associations was seen to short-circuit traditional notions of perception so that the viewer must cope with more profound existential philosophical concerns regarding reality and representation. O'Toole's analysis demonstrated how Magritte's singular treatment of visual semiotics creates an 'interesting story' cumulatively that invokes paradox and contradiction in order to engage the viewer. Likewise, O'Toole (2003, 2018) turned his focus on Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, using a systemic-functional model of analysis to reveal the "language" of the painting. He discussed how Rembrandt's compositional, color, and light decisions combine to guide the viewer's eye and create a dynamic narrative within the painting. And when reading Frank Hinder's *Flight into Egypt* (2018), O'Toole applied the theory of the "hermeneutic spiral"—a model of interpretation in which particular details continually are connected to broader thematic issues.

Stoian (2015) also used the visual semiotics in an experiment of a honeymoon offers advert. Using an application of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual design grammar, Stoian showed how semiotics' laws can be used to strengthen visual communication so as to strengthen an advert to be effective. The research was successful in proving that meticulous use of visual elements—such as color, composition, and framing—is capable of inducing emotions and influencing viewers' perception. In the advertising sample, soft pastel shades and serene landscapes created a sense of romance and serenity, evoking feelings in the audience and fitting their perception of a honeymoon experience. Stoian's study proposed applying visual grammar to advertising professionals, illustrating how a practice in such principles is able to produce more effective marketing campaigns.

Vahid and Esmae'li (2012) also examined the use of visual design in advertisements through investigation of six ads in twin frameworks of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design. The research compared how government and private sector producers applied strategy to convince consumers and discovered acuter differences in strategies. Private firms preferred using tactics that allowed authority to the viewer, instilling a feeling of agency and choice in making decisions. Government campaigns preferred control and dominance, insisting on superiority over the viewer. The study pointed out how visual and pictorial elements in adverts are thoughtfully built to maintain the agenda of the producer, be it selling consumer goods or upholding government control.

Myllylä (2017) used the visual grammar by Kress and van Leeuwen to analyze how children are represented in adult-focused commercials. Drawing from the content analysis of a set of volumes of *Time* magazine, the research developed a structure to classify various types of representation and found occurring patterns in children's representation. For instance, children were represented as vulnerable, playful, or innocent, which evoked emotional responses from the audience. The research also recorded temporal developments, in keeping with temporal developments in society's image of the family and of childhood. This analysis yielded informative evidence regarding semiotic and cultural codes underpinning representation of children in the media.

In a similar other study, Bokek-Cohen (2017) analyzed 48 infant photos utilized by sperm banks to enlist willing recipients. Adopting the approach of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Bokek-Cohen analyzed how the photos have constructed symbolic meaning and have created emotional connections. The research explained how the photos were specifically chosen to portray an idealized image of the donors and allow the recipients to envision a personal and emotional link to the future child. This conscious application of visual representation proves how the semiotic theory can be applied in practice in influencing audience perception and making choices in very individualistic settings. El-Kalla (2015) employed an eclectic method in critiquing print ads through integrating Bell's tests of compositionality, van Leeuwen's dimensions of semiotics, Austin and Searle's speech act theory, and Grice's cooperative principles.

She illustrated in her paper how image and text reinforce each other to create the intended effect on consumers, as both reinforce each other to produce a credible message. Through an examination of advertisements from the socio-pragmatic perspective, El-Kalla illustrated how producers utilize semiotic modes to condition the interpretation of the audience and force them to buy products. Her studies proved the potential of multimodal approaches in advertising, harnessing the manipulative power of semiotics if used in consumer communication. Lastly, other scholars extended the research on cultural codes and meaning-construction to other fields. Rapaille (2001) and Danesi (2004) had already highlighted the role of cultural conventions and common symbols in coming up with societal meanings and paved the way for the follow-up studies. For example, Berger (2019) used these observations to analyze Donald Trump's political image, paying attention to semiotic nuances like his hairdo, expressions, rhetorical devices, metaphors, and humor. Berger's book illustrated how such symbolic features are recruited in the building of Trump's public image and his popularity with certain audiences. Interpreting these semiotic signs, the research proved semiotic models can uncover the hidden dynamics of political communication and identity formation.

Research Gap

In spite of the wide range of research on semiotics and gendered representation, a large research gap lies in the particular investigation of the visual encoding and gender differentiation of emotional distress in paintings. A large percentage of available literature has centered on gender roles in media, advertisements, or written texts, with visual art, especially paintings, being an understudied context of semiotic analysis. In addition, research frequently generalizes the representation of gender without exploring the subtle ways feelings are built up through visual grammar. There is little critical focus on the confluence of gender, emotional representation, and semiotics, particularly with a systematic framework such as Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotic model. This lacuna prevents the full understanding of how art supports and subverts classic stereotypes of masculinity and femininity as expressed by the representation of emotional states. Focusing on the semiotic interpretation of emotional distress in male and female characters in paintings, this study fills this lacuna with new knowledge regarding how visual art reflects society and culture. This research not only fills this empirical and theoretical gap but also offers a model for future research to test emotional and gendered representation across various forms of art and cultural contexts.

Research Methodology

This study has used the qualitative method, and it entails intensive examination of four selected paintings. Two of the selected paintings depict female emotional turmoil, which are *Shark* and *Tiger* by Emma Haddow and *Suppressed Emotion* by Helena Arturaleza Schotman. The other

two paintings depict male emotional turmoil, which are *Despair* by Edvard Munch and *The Incredulity of Thomas* by Caravaggio. To provide a diverse coverage of various types of artwork and eras, the artworks were selected by random means. Close examination of the visual imagery of emotional distress is facilitated by the general choice criterion, that all the paintings distinctly have human figures experiencing emotional pain. Additionally, particular paintings contain visual aspects that are open to the scrutiny of semiotic analysis, including color palette, composition, and meaning.

Every painting is examined from a semiotic point of view, with an emphasis on prominent visual features such as color, composition, symbols, and modality. The study takes into account how these factors cause emotional anguish and contribute to gendered emotional portrayals. How the use of space, appearance, and proximity is attended to, and how such visual practice informs us about the psychological inclinations of the subjects of each portrait, is also given attention. The study explores the way the elements function in their own historical and cultural context to present the underlying meanings and symbolic depictions of emotional suffering in male and female images.

Following an individual analysis of each painting, comparative analysis is conducted to bring out the disparity in the representation of emotional agony between male and female subjects. This discussion organizes the findings according to gender, highlighting repeated visual patterns, contrasts, and particular visual strategies employed to distinguish the representation of emotional distress in male and female figures. By adopting this qualitative research method, this study aims to offer insight into the ways in which gendered emotions are visually represented in art and the cultural narratives these images provoke.

Theoretical framework

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and how meaning is created and communicated through them. It offers a foundational framework for interpreting different forms of human expression across language, media, and art. The origins of semiotics are often traced back to the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure developed a structuralist framework in which a sign consists of two components: the signifier (the physical appearance or expression) and the signified (the mental idea it signifies). Peirce developed this further with his triadic framework of primary and secondary signs, which involves the interpretant—the meaning developed by the observer. This is an emphasis on the role of the audience in the creation of meaning.

Semiotics developed over time into a rich, multifaceted, interdisciplinary area with applications in linguistics, media studies, cultural critique, and visual arts. In visual art, semiotic analysis investigates how images function as cultural texts—transmitting complex meanings through symbolic forms, visual styles, and contextual references.

Semiotics in Visual Art

In the context of visual art, semiotics uncovers how artworks convey ideas, emotions, and social messages. Art is not a discrete product—it is embedded in systems of meaning within culture and history. Visual components like composition, color, spatial organization, and form become signifiers that hold symbolic significance for the viewer. Using semiotic analysis, researchers can explore how these visual signs represent states of emotion or psychology. Here, the research centers on representing emotional disturbance through the visual semiotics of signs, situating works of art as a reflexive and effectual part of social discourse.

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics extends conventional semiotic theory by focusing on the socially constructed and context-dependent nature of meaning. Social semiotics was formulated by researchers such as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, who took the argument beyond fixed sign systems to investigate how meaning is negotiated among the creator, the artifact, and the audience in a given cultural and social environment. Social semiotics does not focus on universal meanings as in classical semiotics but instead takes note of how meaning varies across communities, contexts, and purposes.

This method is particularly valuable in visual art interpretation, as the artist's intention, material and stylistic selection, and the cultural background of the viewer all impact interpretation. Social semiotics permits a more nuanced understanding of how artworks convey emotion, identity, and social values.

Kress and van Leeuwen's Framework

Kress and van Leeuwen, building on Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), created a model called visual grammar. It suggests that pictures, similar to language, convey meaning in relation to structured systems. They recognize three fundamental metafunctions—ideational, interpersonal, and compositional—functioning in synergy to create visual meaning. These metafunctions are a useful tool for exploring how emotional expression is visually composed, especially in terms of gender and psychological states.

Three Metafunctions in Visual Grammar

1. Ideational Metafunction

Ideational metafunction is concerned with the representation of meaning—what is represented in the image, and how it is representing action, emotion, or relationship. It is concerned with participants (human, non-human), actions (what they are doing), and circumstances (environment or background). In the theme of emotional turmoil, this metafunction is helpful in analyzing how gendered characters are represented—whether they are interacting with other figures (transactional) or standing alone (non-transactional). Facial expression, posture, and symbolic characteristics are what cause interpretation of emotional states. It uncovers cultural beliefs about mental states and emotional display in visual narratives.

2. Interpersonal Metafunction

This metafunction deals with the viewer-work of art relationship. It explores the role of features like gaze, angle, and distance on engagement. For instance, a figure's direct stare can "demand" the viewer's emotional investment, while the evasion of eye contact can invite passive viewing. The trajectory of approach—high, low, or frontal—can be interpreted as signifying vulnerability, authority, or neutrality. This layer of metafunctional analysis illustrates how paintings solicit or deter emotional identification and how female or male subjects are positioned to create divergent viewer responses.

3. Compositional Metafunction

The compositional metafunction deals with the structural arrangement of visual elements within an image so as to enable interpretation and the communication of meaning. The three primary dimensions of this role are spatial structure (location on the left-right and top-bottom axes), visual salience (what is salient), and modality (how much realism or abstraction in the image). They come together to create the manner in which the audience sees and interprets the visual message.

In the majority of the visual cultures, objects on the right-hand side of an image are regarded as "Given" or familiar, and those on the left-hand side as "New" or unfamiliar. Similarly, upper sections of a picture represent ideals or abstract concepts, while the lower sections represent real-life or concrete ideas. The object's visual salience, boosted by features such as size, contrast, or color, will direct its prominence. Modality will then direct how an image is felt to be realistic, affectively charged, or symbolic. These composition techniques play a vital role in the presentation of emotional narratives. In artworks that depict emotional struggle, particularly those which map gendered experience, such metafunction illustrates the way positioning and opposition facilitate cultural understandings of emotion. Vision hierarchies and focal stresses permit the expression of embedded meaning about states of emotion and social roles, frequently without language.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Representation of Female Emotional Turmoil:

Painting 1: "Tiger, Shark and Me Sit Down for Tea" by Emma Haddow



Figure 1: "Tiger, Shark and Me Sit Down for Tea" by Emma Haddow

Ideational Metafunction

The painting features a lone woman figure reclining in an elaborate, stormy setting full of symbolism. Her collapsed posture, with tense shoulders and her arms tightly clasped to her chest, signifies deep contemplative nature and vulnerability, indicative of internalized emotional struggle. The tiger and shark behind the reclining figure are dramatic symbolic entities for fighting outward forces. The shark, typical of the unseen threat, symbolizes inner terrors or suppressed fears, and the tiger, typical of the fierceness as a predator, symbolizes external pressures or aggressions in society that require power.

The employment of muted, subdued colors such as greys, pale blues, and pale browns to create the work foreshadows a heavy, suffocating condition of emotions. These colors envelop the subject, providing a visual representation of her being suffocated by internal and external tensions. The abstract, disorganized background figures, such as jagged or whirling shapes, contribute to the confusion and instability in her mind state. The lack of other actors in the scene renders the process non-transactional and isolates the woman as the single embodiment of emotional conflict. The arched, encircling contours to each side of her body metaphorically contain her, visually symbolizing the inability to leave her emotional torment behind.

Interpersonal Metafunction

The downward gaze of the woman, without meeting the stare of the observer directly, creates a visual and emotional distance. The retreat places the subject into isolation and contemplation, but simultaneously provokes sympathy of the observer towards her exposure. The evading direct stare avoids confrontation but rather invites an observer's point of view from the audience that emphasizes her emotional exposure.

The canted perspective in the painting tactfully diminishes the superiority of the subject, situating her in a little subdued setting as opposed to the point of view of the viewer. The point of view aligns with her emotional inferiority, situating the point of view of the viewer in societal superiority or judgment. Softness in the scene, created by sleek brush strokes and smooth transitions between the colours and forms, decreases the modality. This contrast between realism and abstraction puts the spectator into a psychological rather than physical reality, making the emotional effect of the subject's suffering even stronger.

Compositional Metafunction

The woman is located at the center of the work, ensuring that she is the most salient feature of the painting. The disorder that fills the space around her, secondary to the main point of interest, is visually active and purposefully leads the eye back into the woman, repositioning her contemplation as the main story. The contrast between the stability of the woman's peaceful pose and the action offered by the outline of the background heightens her isolation within the midst of turmoil, heightening the emotional force of the scene. The spatial segregation of the painting bifurcates the painting into separated areas: the structured, disordered outer sections represent societal expectations and pressures ("Given"), while the woman herself represents rebellion or resistance to such norms.

The restraining lines of the bodies of people around the subject keep her visually at bay from an enclosed space, symbolizing societal restrictions promoting exposure. Light and dark also dictate meaning for the viewer, using softer, more subdued light to lead the eye towards her face and bearing, symbolizing her emotional state. This vision of light and dark reinforces the cultural myth of the emotional fragility of women, in that they are relegated to being the bearers of unsaid interior unrest instead of voiced rebellion.

Painting 2: “Suppressed Emotion” by Helena Arturaleza Schotman



Figure 2: “Suppressed Emotion” by Helena Arturaleza Schotman

Ideational Metafunction

The picture depicts a broken woman, representing emotional and psychological pain as a result of social norms and inner conflict. A fractured self is literally depicted in the fractured look of the woman, where her body parts or facial formations look separated, contorted, or incomplete. This pictorial disconnection corresponds to the strain of striving for conformity with social norms and resistance to internal emotional conflict.

The jarring, screaming colors—reds, yellows, and blacks—are the apogee of the painting's color scheme, which also conveys a sense of suffocating distress and anxiety. Acting in concert, the colors help to capture the state of heightened emotion of the subject, in which red triggers anger or passion, yellow dread or uncertainty, and black despondency or the threat of social exclusion. Crossing and zigzagging lines cut through the canvas, delineating inner and outer conflicts of the woman. These furious, unordered lines create a sense of movement and tension, as if her own unruly life is being torn apart by forces working against one another. The severe contrasts of light and dark spaces across the canvas are used to make tension that much more palpable, in that they symbolize the struggle between social convention (as embodied through organized, light spaces) and her fractured, unregulated inner life. The transactional process is graphically represented as exterior forces metaphorically upon the woman. Forces, drawn as abstract shapes or intrusive elements, are observed to surround or break through her broken body, and in doing so, indicate that her emotional dissonance is not internalized but exerted by exterior forces of society and culture.

Interpersonal Metafunction

The woman's glare is the most essential part of this painting. Her eyes are closed, showing that she's turned inward and not looking at the viewer. This turned-in attention is reflective of her having descended into the realm of her own mind, where she escapes to past memories and struggles with child abuse. Rather than the old stereotypical portrayal of women as passive observers of their own feelings, her closed eyes signal not assent but turmoil — inner turmoil against repressed anguish. Her posture and attitude deny the classic story of feminine deference and present something sterner and reflective.

Using Markovič's close-up shots invites an intimate view, drawing the viewer into her existence and battle against her own life and being. Framing her bare form in close-up grants little space to breathe, providing a powerful impact out of her struggle. This view not only places the viewer within her confines but also temporarily traps them within the confines of her struggle, forcing them to subject themselves to the agony of her unresolved past with her.

The strong, high-modality colors, such as intense, vivid color with deep, rich contrast, heighten the emotional directness of the painting. The strength of the colors underscores the severity of her pain, putting the viewer in the picture so that she can't get away. Needed beneath the surface of the intense color and shattered imagery is her own concentration, compelling her emotional tension to be unavoidable and causing the abstract representation to occur in an extremely personal and psychological world.

Compositional Metafunction

Foreground dispersed in an unstructured and disjunctive way. The disorganization triggers default attention to disorder and upset in her life on the affective side, such that the very disintegration is a significant feature. By default, the eye is drawn to the woman's face, specifically her severe face, which is a point of focus within the state of disturbance surrounding it. The painting's spatial placement reveals a glaring contrast between the "Ideal" and the "Real."

The top part of the canvas, which corresponds to the "Ideal," would contain light or structured shapes representing society's ideal for calmness, stability, and emotional control. The "Real" is at the bottom or middle part, with the broken and disorganized image of the woman that represents her lack of emotional control. This conflict between the controlled "Ideal" and wild "Real" subverts social norms of emotional control, especially for women, and exposes the emotional toll taken in adopting these ideals.

Its structure also adds to the sense of claustrophobia, jagged lines or constricting forms surrounding the subject, visually representing the social and emotional constraints on her autonomy. The stress between the conflicting energies—light and shadow, order and disorder—also heightens the duality of her oppression.

Women's emotional expression cultural discourses are also challenged by this work. The shattered-up composition and bright colors run counter to the traditional ascription of women as weak or passive emotionally, and instead narrate stories of strength and unbridled vulnerability. The painting encourages the viewer to question the social constraints that structure and, in the vast majority of instances, muffle women's real emotional expressions.

Representation of Male Emotional Turmoil

Painting 3: “Despair” by Edvard Munch



Figure 3: “Despair” by Edvard Munch

Ideational Metafunction

The piece is built around a solitary man with slouched shoulders and downward-cast figuratively stopping profound emotional despair. The stance conveys a surrender to inner pain, with his figure bearing weight, as if burdened by unseen weights. This non-transactional presentation places the man as being deeply introspective, with nothing being transacted to indicate outer guidance or interference. The lack of other players isolates the figure all the more uniquely, affirming his isolation and stressing the inwardness of his agony.

The subdued colour scheme, based on greys, blues, and bleached browns, enforces an oppressive and sombre mood. The colours symbolically express feelings of desolation, loneliness, and contemplation, blue being conventionally linked with stagnant sorrow and grey with numbness or uncertainty. The broken brushwork that surrounds the figure, executed in jagged and serrated lines, introduces tension and disturbance, which symbolizes the instability and fragmentation of his thoughts.

The work is characterized by oppositions between the male and his surroundings. Acute forms, acute corners, and acute objects that encircle the man indicate pressures from the external

environment in the form of expectations of society or his failure being indirectly imposed upon him. Tension between such forms and the figure's immobile, defeated stance indicates a non-correspondence between pressures from the external environment and his internal conflict.

Interpersonal Metafunction

The downward look of the masculine figure avoids eye contact with the viewer, emphasizing his isolation and reflection. The avoidance of eye contact reinforces the role of the viewer as disempathetic spectator, establishing an emotional distance that fits cultural ideals of stoic manhood. By avoiding encounter, the figure allows the viewer to empathize with his distress but remain impersonal and vigilant.

The point of view of the painting's gaze softly takes away the autonomy and agency of the figure. This point of view places the viewer in the position of looking down on the figure, adding to his vulnerability and subordination to forces outside him. This point of view prompts pity or sadness but also speaks to tales of society, which have a proclivity to place male vulnerability as smothered or repressed struggle, present but never spoken about in the open.

The softness of texture and the muteness of contrast in the painting add to the production of a low modality, the blending of realism and abstraction. The blurred edges between forms in the arrangement take away sharp definition, expressing the communal dimension of despair instead of basing it on the subjectivized, individuated experience. Through abstraction, the anguish of the figure can become accessed transculturally and trans-historically, highlighting emotional universality against the specificity of the personal.

Compositional Metafunction

The placement of the male figure in the center of the work positions him as the most powerful element, dominating attention even as the monochromatic colors and broken background cloud him. His placement up front will bring attention to the urgency and intensity of his mood, and the fact that the jagged shapes around him and the shading bring attention to tension between him and the disordered surroundings. All of these form a visual hierarchy, which is the focal narrative to his despair.

The spatial composition in the painting juxtaposes the turmoil of the figure in the foreground against wider societal norms in the background. The latter, as evidenced in darker and more linear contours, stands for societal ideals of stoic restraint and emotional suppression expected of men. The juxtaposition judges the cultural script that expects men to suppress emotions and points it out to be the location of their own interior conflict and tears.

The figure outlining also contributes to the isolation theme. Irregular, dark lines engulf him, giving a two-dimensional effect of entrapment and contributing to his inability to shed the psychological and social burdens upon him. The contrast between light and dark accents his inner complexity, his struggle being symbolized by the shadows, and his thin highlights on his face and hands symbolizing poor glimmers of self-knowledge or hope.

The cultural salience of this piece captures the expectation of men to repress vulnerability and endure it in suffering. In its rendering of the figure in a condition of overt emotional defeat, the piece resists these conventions and implies that male vulnerability is repressed at the cost of their emotional isolation. This rendering subjects masculinity to critique, demanding witnesses to bear witness and contest the unseen emotional pain usually masked behind ideals of masculinity and stoicism.

Painting 4: “The Incredulity of Thomas” by Caravaggio

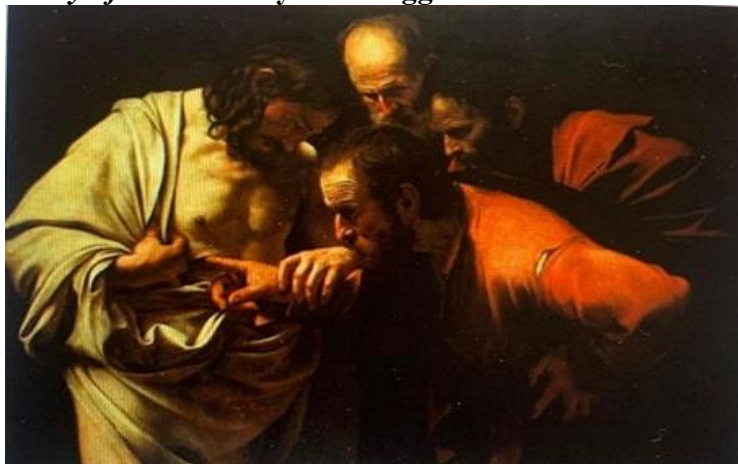


Figure 4: “The Incredulity of Thomas” by Caravaggio

Representational Metafunction

Caravaggio's Doubting Thomas may be interpreted as a graphic portrait of a man overwhelmed by emotional and psychological turmoil. Its eponymous figure, Thomas, is shown in a gasp of significant intimacy, a hand reaching inside the side of another man, who stands calmly, almost passively, watching. It is a reassuring gesture that can be viewed as a metaphor for how humans struggle to touch the painful truth or reality. The furrowed brow of the man, his steely gaze, and tension in the body depict a tremendous inner conflict, perhaps an inner struggle between belief and doubt, fear and courage, denial and acceptance. The realistic rendering of the figures adds to the truthfulness of Ken and Joan's emotional struggle. The wound itself acts as a metaphor for the pain and scars one carries, both on the outside and inwardly, yet the challenge lies in confronting the very thing you need to heal from. The painting captures a universal human experience: the moment you need to face something fundamentally disturbing, a personal truth, a traumatic memory, an existential fear. The raw emotion of the painting is accessible to anyone whose brain has ever fabricated a narrative, drawing them in to question, to fear, or to reassure themselves when things are uncertain.

Interactive Metafunction

More intense emotional focus within the painting is what draws one into the force of the emotional dynamics, made all the more direct through the means the figures interact with one another. The central figure's eye is fixed on the wound, his face a mixture of concentration, shock and perhaps even fear. The focal point directs the eye of the viewer onto the touch, allowing them to be a witness to this moment of openness. The calm, resigned look on the other man's face stands in stark contrast to the angst of the central figure, bringing with it a sense of tension. The contrast between the two makes the viewer think about similar bouts of doubt and conflict that they might experience in their own life, making the painting extremely personal and compelling. Furthermore, the application of chiaroscuro, or deep contrasts of light and shadow, also adds to this involvement. Light illuminates the central action, playing across the wound and the hands, and encircling shadow envelops the figures, adding intimacy and immediacy. In addition to directing the eye of the viewer, this lighting method is also used to enhance the emotional effect of the scene and makes the viewer feel they are included in this charged moment. The figures fill this space so detailedly with the artist paying strict attention to their

arms, their stance that we can't help but be drawn in and made to feel intimate, involved, a bit too intimate with the action.

Compositional Metafunction

The composition of the painting is deliberately closely set in order to amplify the paradigm of emotional and psychological tension. Thus, the hands and wound are pushed into high relief against the dark ground in an enhancing salience light-driven visual field. This does fairly naturally put the focus of the viewer squarely in the center on the essence of the action, symbolizing the essence of the man's inner conflict in a manner that imbues his actions with their own vitality. The bodies are close up, their figures forming a close, triangular composition that forces the viewer's eye to the wound. This type of framing injects a claustrophobic intensity, imprisoning the viewer in the same emotional sphere as the figures. The light and shade emphasizing the action at the center of the painting, yet equally a means of providing depth and fullness to the figures, enhancing the sense of tridimensionality. The positioning of the figures and the looks guide the eye across the painting, from the central figure's face to his opposite hand and back to the wound. This compositional design highlights the pictorial themes of scepticism, confirmation and emotional turmoil. The exact positioning of each element relative to the others diminishes the viewer's notice to a passing glance, compelling a conclusion that is only undermined by the determination of the leading action in the work; there remains an unresolved tension to match the emotional climaxes of the work, the movement is built.

In short, the stoic portrait in Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* is a masterful surrender to human passion. Through its vivid charting of a portrait of a man conflicted with himself, his intense struggle with the viewer, and its composition's reverently planned symmetry, the painting enacts a shared sense of doubt, fear, and seeking for confirmation. Through explorations of these matters, the painting overcomes its religious framing in a manner that is both eternal and profoundly human and accessible.

Comparative Analysis: Emotional Distress in Male and Female Depictions

Within visual art, concepts of emotional distress are rooted within gendered narratives about the way men and women ought to react and behave under emotional pain. A comparative perspective unfolds itself through *Tiger, Shark and Me Sit Down for Tea* by Emma Haddow, *Suppressed Emotion* by Helena Arturaleza Schotman, *Despair* by Edvard Munch, and *The Incredulity of Thomas* by Caravaggio, in terms of the emotional framing and non-framing of male and female figures. Based on these theories, this analysis examines the ideological, intersubjective, and compositional elements of these paintings to illuminate gendered differences in expressing emotional distress.

Ideational Metafunction: Internal vs. External Conflict Themes

The female focuses on the attempt to be acceptable inwardly, but domain and feminine societal constraint imposing not only mentally but physically the shape that Haddow's *Tiger, Shark and Me Sit Down for Tea* and Schotman's *Suppressed Emotion* take respectively. The single female figures in these paintings are located in shattered or disordered realms, which metaphorically reveal their psychological conflict in terms of vision. The imagery of outside forces, as the invading tiger and submerged shark in Haddow's and slashing, crossing lines in Schotman's, indicates that women's emotional upset is usually the result of both internalized worries and outside forces. The subdued, pale colors in Haddow's painting are a good contrast to the vivid reds and blacks in Schotman's work, indicating different levels of upset — one of stifling quietude, the other of splintering disruption.

Male emotional distress, on the other hand, is treated by isolation, in Munch's *Despair* and Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Thomas*, and confrontation with facts of life. Munch's isolated figure bears a heavy inner conflict, with muted, broken brushstrokes evoking the quietly imposed grief. Caravaggio, however, conveys turmoil through an action of the body — Thomas's inspection of Christ's wound — to illustrate a requirement of concrete evidence to alleviate psychic disturbance. In contrast, the male figures, as distinct from their female counterparts, are placed within narratives which either exclude them from external interaction (Munch) or contextualize their heaving as an intellectual or philosophical crisis (Caravaggio). This would be to argue that masculine agony is typically represented as an internal or ideological struggle, as against reaction to external factors.

Interpersonal Metafunction: Gaze and Access to Emotions

In the works of feminine unrest, the figures fail to address the viewer's eyes, incorporating a sense of emotional isolation. The downward look and shut body of the woman in Haddow's work exhibit introversion and helplessness, establishing distance with the viewer. Similarly, Schotman's broken figure with shut eyes conveys an inner turmoil, a refusal to face what is outside. This voyeuristic dissociation renders female suffering a spectacle to be consumed at arm's length, implicitly encouraging the idea that women's pain is internally and privately experienced, something to be endured in silence.

By contrast, the males in Munch's and Caravaggio's works employ other strategies of engagement. In contrast to Haddow's female model, which refuses direct sight, Munch's lone figure is set in an open area, encouraging observers to reflect on his grief. And in absolute contrast to all the other paintings, Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of Thomas* provides direct dialogue between figures. We start: Thomas is far more aggressive in pushing at someone (i.e., Christ) than whining impassively at god, making the male ailment dependent on external intervention and not passive acceptance. This is an important distinction because it observes the manner in which male distress is figured as a struggle — against oneself (as in Munch) or against the exterior reality of one's own fact (as in Caravaggio) — but female distress is figured as a struggle that's been internalized and still brought to a halt.

The spatial arrangement in the paintings affirms gendered divergence within the representation of turmoil. The figures are pictorially compressed within Haddow's and Schotman's works either in curling masses of disorder (Haddow) or broken, intersecting forms (Schotman). Such compression signifies social forces that shape and repress a woman's emotional life, implying that a woman's suffering is a burden imposed upon her and also locked within her.

Yet Munch and Caravaggio make male turbulence with an even more naked feeling of exposure. Munch's isolated figure, placed in an open, desolate landscape, conveys the alienating effects of emotional turmoil in a way that does not have that same feeling of containment in the female representations. Caravaggio's taste in composition, his dramatized chiaroscuro, and language of direct physical engagement make emotional disturbance exterior in the power of kinetic encounter; it fights agony, puts it on the periphery as something to be confronted face-on instead of endured in secret. These stylistic decisions signal that female unrest is often visually restricted and inwardly directed, or the interior unrest of women, whereas male unrest is accorded space, either in terms of being separated (as in Munch) or through an externalized battle (as in Caravaggio).

The Gendered Narrative of Emotional Representation

This reading indicates the gendering of emotional distress as it is represented in artworks. The internalized characteristics of female distress are symbolized by containment, withdrawal, and absence of face-to-face contact. This is a reflection of cultural myths that put women in the position of passive receivers of emotional harm, ensnared by cultural constructions. In fact, male distress is characterized as withdrawn action or struggle outside, consistent with the cultural masculine standard of fortitude and rational response to emotional hurt.

Collectively, the paintings break down and repeat cultural stories of emotional fragility, exposing underlying cultural prejudices in the way we see and feel pain along gender lines. Examining them through the functional linguistic prism, we know that these images say a lot about the ways in which visual modes represent and consolidate gendered knowledge of emotional fragility.

Conclusion

Male and female characters' gendered anger in paintings imitates intense semiotic modalities characteristic of society and culture. Female characters' emotional conflict is primarily an internal, static process. Women are seen as having reluctant glances, subdued body language, and passive poses, which indicate resignation and emotional restraint. The employment of curved, fluid lines and delicate, sad colors (thinned blues, pinks, greys) indicates their vulnerability, their weakness. The high angle decreases their agency, making them emotional but finally powerless archetypes. All these combined fix feminine distress in non-transactional pain, as the imposed society's inadequacies instead of lived experience through rebellion. The close, realistic portraits are sympathy-provoking, enforcing over-simplified notions of women as sensitive, resignatory and externally motivated.

Male emotional storm is external, aggressive, and active. Men are shown in active poses employing angular, broken shapes and confident, high-contrast colors — dark greys, black, and brief flashes of red or orange — that represent tension, resistance, and inner turmoil. Drama that increasingly spills over into social activism, as they struggle with external forces in society, capitalism, and life in general. The abstracted low-angle angles and portraits work to amplify their resilience and strength, locating them as stoic, abstract entities. The abstraction also keeps the viewer emotionally at bay, eliciting thought rather than immediate empathy. This presentation also aligns with cultural ideals of masculinity that script emotional struggle as mountains to be endured rather than monsters to be displayed. These portrayals validate the belief that masculinity is synonymous with power, hardness and stoicism in pain, especially without being very openly vulnerable.

By examining the visual semiotics of these works, this comparative analysis points to the manner in which they strengthen deeply ingrained ideologies of gender identity. Depicting female distress as an interiorized conflict and solitary struggle evokes emotional identification, while male distress is depicted as an exterior, action-driven struggle in order to express more toughness and agency. The relationship of curved vs. angular shape, muted vs. obvious colour and intimate vs. abstract composition is an expression of a wider social construction of male activity and female passivity as desirable. This study aims to start to reveal the stereotype characters held in visual art by questioning these representations and arguing ultimately for a more subtle and a more balanced portrayal of emotional experience across gender in an effort to gain further insight into gendered vulnerability, strength, and resilience.

References

- Adami, E., Diamantopoulou, S., & Lim, F.V. (2022). Design in Gunther Kress's social semiotics. *London Review of Education*, 20(1), 41.
- Berger, A. (2019). Trump: A Semiotic Analysis. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 15(1), 49-75.
- Caravaggio, M. (1601). *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* [Painting]. Sanssouci Picture Gallery, Potsdam, Germany.
- El-Kalla, D. (2015). Advertisements as Semiotic Communicative Acts: A Socio-pragmatic Study (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Suez Canal University.
- Haddow, E. (n.d.). *Tiger, Shark, and Me Sit Down for Tea* [Painting].
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2002). Colour as a semiotic mode: Notes for a grammar of colour. *London: Sage Publications*, 3, 343-368.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge.
- Munch, E. (1894). *Despair* [Painting]. The Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway.
- Myllylä, K. (2017). Children in advertisements: Visual representation of children in *Time magazine*, volumes of 1994, 2004, and 2014. University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Retrieved from
- O'Toole, M. (2008). Thinking with your own eyes: Magritte and the logical metafunction. In N. Nørgård (Ed.), *Systemic functional linguistics in use: Odense working papers in language and communication*, 29, 63-84. Denmark: University of Southern Denmark.
- O'Toole, M. (2011). *The language of displayed art*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Schotman, H. A. (n.d.). *Suppressed Emotion* [Painting].
- Stoian, C. (2015). *The Discourse of Tourism and National Heritage: A Contrastive Study from a Cultural Perspective*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.