

Nighthawks: so much
space and emptiness



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Nighthawks: So Much Space and Emptiness The mood exuded by Hopper's Nighthawks is gloom. Three people are presented, seated at a diner, late at night. The most striking aspect is the amount of empty space. There is so much empty space, well-lit, and unfilled. The sidewalk outside the diner's well-lit window is empty and almost unnaturally clean. There are no people to be seen, there is no garbage on the street, and even the windows of a shop across the street appear without any decoration. The lights from inside of the diner illuminate the barrenness of the outside, allowing the observer to see quite clearly the emptiness and the aloneness of the patrons sitting inside.

This feeling of gloom is exacerbated as one peers into the diner through the huge window. There is so much empty space in the diner. Three patrons, two men and one woman, sit at a curving counter. The men are dressed in black, with hats covering their heads, and they seem to almost blend into the shadows of the night. One man's face, his back to the observer, is covered partly by a shadow. The coffee cups which sit on the dark-brown counter contrast sharply with the men. The cups are small, but the brightness of their white color makes them more identifiable and perceptible than the men. The coffee cups seem permanent whereas the male diners seem almost transient.

The third patron, a woman, is a striking contrast to the male patrons. She is wearing a bright red dress, her long hair is a bright orange, and her pale complexion is heavily made up. There seems to be permanence to her, in contrast to the male diners, as if she belongs at this diner. She is talking to no one; instead she is simply glancing downward as if bored. The worker behind the counter is slouched, dressed in a bright white uniform, and

looking out the window. This seems odd as there really isn't anything to see outside the window. These four people are together, but the spacing and the colors make them appear to be strangers. They are not talking. They are not smiling. There is nothing to indicate any conversation; indeed, there is nothing to suggest that they are even aware of each other's presence.

Hopper completed this painting shortly after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. America was about to enter World War 2, and the prospect of war must have influenced the painter. The diner is set in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, New York. These facts add to the painting's strangeness. New York is known for many things, but empty space is not one of these things. Manhattan, to be sure, is jam-packed with people and with buildings. It is dirty and busy and it never sleeps. That this diner, therefore, is situated in Manhattan only serves to deepen the pervasive sense of gloom and loneliness.

As one withdraws a bit a second time, looking into the diner is very much like looking at fish inside of a fish tank. The diners and the worker appear to be confined within this large glass-encased diner. There is no door for entry or exit. One wonders how these people got inside, and how they will ever get out. Are they trapped in this diner, this gloom How long will they be forced to stay inside More, the woman is dressed in red. Is she the nighthawk Are the men the prey, gloomy and lonely, and the woman in red the predator The Nighthawks painting is so striking not only because of what you can see, but for what you cannot see. The space is empty, the people seem lonely, and perhaps this is the painter's purpose.

Work Cited

Nighthawks. Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved August 22, 2006.

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