

An analysis of auguste rodin's, "the gates of hell" essay sample



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Introduction

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) is a French sculptor who first served many years of apprenticeship as a modeler before he was commissioned by the French government in 1880 to make *The Gates of Hell*. This work was supposed to serve as a door for the planned Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris (Musée des Beaux Arts) which had unfortunately never materialized. And like the museum, *The Gates of Hell* was also an unfinished work of art after twenty years in the making, with several key pieces being dismantled and exhibited independently. Fortunately, the piece was successfully reassembled together in 1917 and was finally cast in bronze. The inspiration for the subject is Dante's *inferno* in 'Divine Comedy' (Le Normand-Romain, Antoinette 2008; Vincent 2004).

This paper will give a clear description of *The Gates of Hell*. It will also provide a formal analysis of the art piece as well as present interpretation and give judgment.

1. Description

The Gates of Hell is a door 20 feet 10 3/4 inches high and 13 feet 2 inches wide. The French sculpture artist Auguste Rodin conceived it in France in 1880. Alexis Rudier finally cast it in bronze in Paris in 1928, many years after Rodin died (Philadelphia Museum of Art 2008). The piece is divided into three sections; the tympanum, left panel and the right panel. The entire surface of the door is covered with naked bodies of different sizes of women, <https://assignbuster.com/an-analysis-of-auguste-rodins-the-gates-of-hell-essay-sample/>

men and children, except for one centaur (half-human and half-horse) at the left doorpost. There is also an old woman in the middle of the left doorpost. The base of the door however is empty of figures. The artwork is made of a combination of low and high relief except for the three standing figures at the top and the seated figure at the center of the lintel, which are rounded sculptures. All throughout the three sections are figures carved out shallowly (low relief) while others almost projected completely out from the flat background (high relief). Along the doorpost, the figures are all in low relief. The human figures are carved in different kinds of posture, some were standing, others were seated while others still were either crouching, kneeling, climbing on walls, lying on its back or belly, kissing, making love or are depicted as if they are ready to tumble down. Even the doorposts are covered with naked humans depicted as climbing for the top or looking up to it except for the two figures at the right bottom that are in the act of kissing. The bodies are either exposed completely or covered. Although the figures look as if they are carved independently from each other, other figures do overlap. In the left and right panel, the naked figures look as if they are all swept downward by a landslide or lava (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

The most dominant figures of the art piece are three standing figures at the top, a seated figure at the lintel, a crouching man at the left panel located near the bottom and a man who is carrying a woman high in his arms near the bottom at the right panel. High up at the centre above the tympanum are three figures of men standing closely to each other with heads thrown over to its side, bodies twisted and curved toward the center and all right arms stretched out front and touched each other. These figures are located

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outside of the framed door. Right below is a man in obvious deep contemplation. He is carved seating at the narrow top edge at the back of a stone chair at the center of the lintel, left arm in chin, head down and right arm on top of the right knee. At the back of him, at the tympanum, are low and high relief bodies of men and women in kneeling, lying or standing postures, each depicted independently from each other. At the right of the tympanum is a figure lying down in his back with almost all part of the body (head first) projecting perpendicularly out from the background. What is common in all of the bodies is that all of them, except that of the old woman, looks healthy yet their facial expression reflect agony or unrest (except of the *thinking* person at the center of the lintel). The forms of the body are all realistic (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

- Formal Analysis

1. Line

Rodin uses lines to define his subject. The solid thick vertical and horizontal straight lines of the art piece tell that the artwork is a door. The rest of the artwork consisted of curved and flowing lines. As can be observed, not one single naked body is standing straight up and erect but all of it assumed a twisted curved postures in combination with some horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines that suggests movement and life. In fact, the sculpture radiates active energy for all of them are in the act of doing something, for example, they were either climbing, reaching, falling, kissing etc. The absence of many vertical lines in the figures also suggests individual instability and imbalance as if each figure is not in the relaxed state. Only

the vertical straight lines of the doorpost that framed the artworks lend stability to the piece. Moreover, the presence of many double curves in the figures gives a general impression of chaos in the whole artwork yet individually the presence of slow curves in each figure imparts sensuality. In the empty spaces in the right and door panels and doorpost, curved and flowing lines can also be seen suggesting a scene of figures being swept down by a raging lava or landslide. Moreover, the lines of each individual naked body are thick and distinct which means that each figure or form can be identified clearly from each other (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

1. Color

Only one color is use and that is a shiny dark brown bluish color indicating that the art piece is cast in bronze. In relation to the piece, the dark color enhances the gloom of the subject. The color though may have no intentional purpose for the art piece. Usually monumental sculptures are cast in bronze so that the load exerted by the massive height can be supported, otherwise the whole art piece may crumble (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

1. Space

Although the size of the painting is large, there is only a minimal negative space (space that is not occupied by objects). The entire space is almost occupied by figures of different sizes; there is only a minimal space between figures except those at the right and left panels. Due to the presence of many figures in varied postures or positions, only a limited empty space is left, so that generally the artwork looks chaotic and overcrowded (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

1. Texture

A rough texture is very dominant in the art piece. The texture is achieved with the use of lines. With the use of repetitive and echoing curve and flowing lines in the empty spaces in the viewer can say that the figures are in an unpleasant and uncomfortable place. The long curve lines in the empty spaces in both the right and door panel also suggest a smooth texture like that of a flowing mud or lava. "Roughness" can also be observed in the faces of the naked figures. Lines along the contours of the face are used to suggest agony. One important use of textured surfaces here is that it captures the variations of light as it reflects in the object (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

1. Shapes

Vertical and horizontal lines create a rectangular shape and division of a door. On the other hand, the curved lines help to create human body shapes. Curved lines also created a wavy shape of a flowing lava or mud .

1. Proportion

The sizes of the figure in the art piece vary; the same age group were carved sometimes in a small sizes and sometimes in bigger sizes. Figures that were smaller appear to be far away from the viewer than those that are bigger. In addition, most of the smaller sizes looks insignificant than those that are bigger. The bigger sizes are noticed first before the eye shifts to the smaller sizes. In a way the viewer gets the impression that those carved in bigger sizes not only looks near but also that they are important while those carved in smaller sizes served for the most part as backgrounds to enhance

the meaning of the bigger sizes. For example, the thinking man at the top of the lintel is larger than the figures in the background.

His bigger size and position seems to suggest that the thinking man's thoughts is centered on them, perhaps he is pondering about their plight. Moreover, if we take into account the background's disorderly, varied postures and faces full of agony in contrast to the thinking man's calm posture and facial expression, the meaning is further enhanced. The thinking man's location at the top suggests also that he is actually pondering the fate of man in general, particularly the consequences of their actions. Also, the other big size figures are those three figures at the top located outside the doorframe. Since they were not a part of the door, it suggests that they stand there to warn the people who enters or follows the path that leads to hell. The big size figures of a crouching man in the left panel and the man carrying a woman at the right panel suggest that these figures may have been taken from Dante's Divine Comedy. The difference in sizes also lends variety to the art piece, even though the only subject is a human naked body (Dudley & Faricy 263-264) .

1. Balance

Although the artwork consisted of many figures, overall it is a symmetrically balanced work. The length and width of the two door panels are equal. The same correlation can be said of the two-door post. The figures in the right and left panel balanced each other in the relative size and numbers of the figures, with each panel not being too overcrowded. The figures on the left post are also balanced by the same relative size and numbers of figures at

the right post. Placement of the figures also contributes to the balance of the art piece; the three figures at the topmost part are placed at the center, otherwise if it is placed to the far right or left, the monumental artwork would look imbalanced. The same thing can be said of the *Thinker*. The opposing directions of the figures also balance the artwork for the eyes are guided back and forth in left or right panels. So as result the viewer will get to have a survey of the whole art piece. In addition, since it is a massive structure, the climbing figures at the doorpost /columns helps to balance the artwork since the upward direction guides the viewer to look up, that is to see what is at the top portion (Dudley & Faricy 263-264).

1. Rhythm and Movement

The use of a combination of straight, diagonal, horizontal and curved lines in the naked bodies suggests movement. The same thing can be said of the curved and flowing lines in the empty spaces in the right and door panels that created textured moving lava. Specifically, the curved lines in the moving lava or mud are curving upward, which tells that the direction of the flow is downward. The curving lines that curved upward also helped to guide the eye from the top to the bottom. In contrast, many of the figures are looking up, or have arms that are raised upward suggesting that they are moving upward. This means that the figures are going against the flow of the lava or mud; they are trying to escape or get out of the place where they are presently in. The use of many repetitive curved lines in the empty spaces also suggest rhythmic vibration; the naked figures are not only falling but that they are tumbling down fast for the current is strong(Dudley & Faricy 263-264) .

1. Interpretation

Since the title of the art piece is *The Gates of Hell*, the art piece speaks about the ways in which man may lead himself to hell. The use of sensual human naked figures strongly reflects human evil *desires*. Man's evil desires like illicit sexual pleasure (as symbolized by the adulterous figures of Paolo and Francesca who are represented as the figures in the act of making love), human vanity (symbolized by an old woman who is punished for being physically vain) and selfish human ambition (as symbolized by Ugolino in Dante's comedy; he is the man who crouches towards his child to eat him after he was imprisoned for treason) are the keys that unlock the gates to hell (Le Normand-Romain 2008).

The presence of flowing lava indicates that this evil desire is strong in men, sometimes they feel as if they are being swept to doom because of it. The bodies portrayed are not skeletons or dead bodies but strong living bodies that suggest an ongoing battle of living men against evil human desires. The men's act of going against the flow of the flowing lava or mud and the agony in their faces suggest man's attempt to overcome evil in their life so that they will not go to hell.

The three figures at the top suggest human conscience that warns man of the painful consequences in hell, and as man engages in evil; his conscience becomes twisted or distorted. The person in deep contemplation suggests that man should think first before proceeding to execute any planned action otherwise he would suffer the torments of hell in the end.

1. Judgment

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Choosing a negative subject like hell is not appealing. However, Rodin is successful in portraying the chaotic struggles that man goes through as he find himself on the way to hell through portraying overcrowd surfaces, putting in opposing and varied postures, combining small and big sizes, depicting an agonizing facial expression and use of downward flowing movement. The use of curves to create human body that reflect evil human desires is very creative. Rodin also portrays the human body realistically, creating the impression that evil desires and man's struggle to overcome it is very real (Dudley & Faricy 263-264). For men, *The Gates of Hell* is a very good and convincing work of art.

1. Conclusion

The Gates of Hell utilizes a negative subject yet it is a beautiful work of art because of the successful portrayal of Rodin of the negative aspect of hell. He did this through a unified and creative combination of the elements and principles of art.

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Auguste Rodin, French (1840 - 1917), *The Gates of Hell* ,

conceived 1880-1917; bronze sculpture, 1928; 20 feet 10 3/4

inches x 13 feet 2 inches x 33 3/8 inches

Found in Philadelphia Museum of Art

(Philadelphia Museum of Art 2008)

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