

# Frida kahlo narrative essay

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Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was a Mexican artist who grew up during the Mexican Revolution, a time of great social and economic change. There was a strong sense of nationalistic pride during this time, which is evident in her later works. During childhood, Kahlo had polio, this affected her growth and development. Furthermore, she was involved in a bus accident later in her life, which damaged her spine and was extremely traumatic in her mental processes. Because of this, she had ongoing surgery throughout her life, and, was in constant pain.

However, after this accident, she began painting to express herself. As a result of her accident, she suffered numerous miscarriages and was unable to have children - an issue she explores in her 1932 work *Henry Ford Hospital*. Kahlo was an active participant in the social and political landscape of Mexico, and used artworks to express her social and political views, as well as themes of her physical pain and pain, cultural background and mythology, and Mexican traditions through her dress, layout, and symbolism.

Particularly evident in *Las Dos Fridas*, history and culture are shown to be an incredibly influential and important aspect of Kahlo's mindset and views on life and her own personal and cultural identity. *Las Dos Fridas* is one of Kahlo's largest works at approximately 68 x 68 inches in size. It is a departure from the retablo format she frequently used, reflecting Kahlo's desire for her work to be noticed at the Surrealist exhibition for which it was intended. Two monumental, full length representations of the artist are seated side-by-side on a simple green bench, gently holding hands.

Behind them, dark, jagged clouds blanket the sky, eliminating any specific sense of place. The two figures are linked by a shared circulatory system which pumps blood between their exposed hearts. The figure on the left uses a clamp in an attempt to stanch the flow of blood falling on her stiff white gown. <sup>3</sup> As the blood pools in the folds of her dress, it spills over and falls onto the hem of her skirt in uniform, circular droplets. The shape of the falling droplets of blood mimics, both in color and shape, the embroidered floral pattern which adorns the bottom of her skirt.

This antiquated frock with an elaborately decorated lace bodice covers the majority of the figure's body with the exception of her forearms and her left breast, which is exposed by an irregularly formed void in the garment. <sup>4</sup> Significantly, the lack of loose thread and the absence of the excess fabric that would have been produced had her garment been forcibly ripped open suggests a less violent, perhaps voluntary, method of exposure. Adjacent to the figure's heart, the lace bodice is interrupted by a cutout which provides a view of the white under-layer supporting the lacework.

This oblong cutout, bordered by ribbon and topped with an intricate knot of hair-like fabric, references the female anatomy. The figure's demure posture and vividly painted red lips convey a sense of femininity which is repeated in her elaborate gown. Her heart is embedded in her body, a part of her self, whereas the heart of the figure on the right seems to float, affixed to her gown but not to her body. Furthermore, the heart of the portrait on the left has been surgically dissected to reveal its inner-workings while the heart of the figure on the right is intact.

The two figures are connected by an elongated artery which wraps around the European Kohl's neck, contrasting the white lace of her gown with the deep red of her own blood. The self-portrait on the right exudes a much more masculine aura than her companion; her lips are unpainted and the slightest shadow of a mustache darkens her upper lip. Additionally, her spread knees and slightly curved back suggest a more relaxed, less demure, pose. The masculine elements of the portrait on the right are complicated by the way in which the thin fabric of her blouse clings to her breasts, highlighting their outline and affirming her femaleness.

She is clothed in the Tenant dress native to the Isthmus of Authentic, home to a traditionally matriarchal society known for the strength and independence of its indigenous female residents. 5 The white hem of the Tenant Kohl's dress is embroidered with a white-on-white floral pattern that mimics the vivid red flowers of the European own, symbolically connecting the two figures and reminding the viewer that the blood dripping on the white gown comes from the bodies of both figures due to their shared circulatory system. While the vascular system of the figure on the left is completely exposed and travels across the surface of her gown, the main artery of the figure on the right disappears under the shoulder of her blouse, reappearing as it wraps around her arm. The Tenant Kohl is penetrated by the artery leading from her heart to the medallion held in her right hand. This artery culminates in an image of Riviera as a child which Kohl delicately holds near her womb. Alternatively, the cylindrical shape of the medallion and the positioning of Kohl's hand suggests a vulgar masculine gesture, reiterating the androgynous nature of the Tenant Kohl.

In spite of their many differences, the two Kohls are inextricably linked, not only due to their role as multiple facets of the artist's identity but by their interlocking hands, the continuity of the hems of their gowns, and their shared circulatory system. This symbiotic relationship reiterates the unity of these two figures, not as conflicting elements of Kohl's identity, but as the visual expression of all facets of one complex whole. *Lass Dos Fridays* serves as a depiction of the multiple facets of Kohl's identity which span centuries of Mexican history.

Kohl's use of elements drawn from throughout Mexican history forges a sense of unity that encompasses Mexico pre-Columbian, Colonial, and Revolutionary past. Thus, rather than dichotomies, *Lass Dos Fridays* embodies the unity of seemingly incompatible parts which express Kohl's conceptualization of Mexico and her personal identity as it related to the history of her country. Because Kohl's father was German and her mother was Indian, *Lass Dos Fridays* can be interpreted as a visualization of her mixed European/Mexican heritage. The concept of the Colonial is of particular importance.

As a product of the European colonization of Mexico, Kohl literally embodies both the colonizer and the colonized. In *Lass Dos Fridays*, Kohl uses a lacy, white and characteristically European or American gown to represent outside influence in Mexico. In addition to her mixed heritage, Kohl quite literally utilized her self-portraiture, especially manipulations of costume, to transform herself into a representation of Mexican history and identity. Kohl's manipulation of Mexican tradition to comment on contemporary politics is

exemplified by her appropriation of La Lorena in Henry Ford Hospital, 1932 (fig.

AY). In this self-portrait, Kohl depicts the aftermath of the abortion of her most recent pregnancy. The popular perception of Kohl's views on motherhood assert that, "she lived as well with a yearning for a child she could never have" her smashed pelvis led only to miscarriages and at least three therapeutic abortions. 126 This traditional view does not account for the fact that Kohl herself requested an abortion and voluntarily ingested castor oil in the hope of ending her 1932 pregnancy. Henry Ford Hospital is a self portrait of a crying Kohl, laying naked and disheveled on a hospital bed following her 1932 abortion at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Her bed rests at a precarious angle, situated in a vast expanse of barren land, possibly a reference to the loneliness a Mexican woman felt who rejected deeply embedded cultural norms about womanhood and motherhood. 30 In the background, Kohl added a skyline reminiscent of the River Rouge Plant in Detroit, calling to mind the role of the female body as a site dedicated to the production of children. Placing herself against a stark white sheet soaked in her own blood, Kohl included prominent tears rolling down her face. These tears are the most straightforward link between Kohl and La Lorena. ! In depicting herself as La Lorena, Kohl utilized the power of folklore to address social issues far beyond the scope of her personal angst. She appropriated a cultural symbol as a direct commentary on societal norms and their restrictive nature regarding women and their ability to control reproduction.

In Henry Ford Hospital, Kohl explicitly challenges the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore that categorizes women as either good or bad mothers. 32 This <https://assignbuster.com/frida-kahlo-narrative-essay/>

dichotomy leaves little freedom for women to exist between these two extremes and is clearly tailored to the preservation of male power. Kohl does present herself in a vulnerable state, but her brazen depiction of her disregard cultural norms which equated womanhood to motherhood references the powerful Micronesian goddesses rather than the violated Lorena.

In depicting herself as La Lorena, Kohl lays the groundwork for Chicane artists to redefine the role of women in these cultures without abandoning their three mother figures, La Lorena, La Virgin De Guadalupe, and La Mainline. Henry Ford Hospital challenged cultural norms concerning womanhood and allowed Kohl to publicly address issues she was otherwise unwilling to discuss. Through her art, Friday lived this different reality, announcing that giving birth to the other within us is where 'who we are' begins. 4 Self-proclaimed as the one who gave birth to herself' (Feints, 1995, plate 49), Friday Kohl painted her own reality; reclaiming it, reflecting it and repeatedly re-living it. A performer of gender roles, unabashedly excessive in femininity as well as masculinity, and an intimate lover of both women and men, she painted narratives ND wrote images that exploit the creative tensions concealed and compelled by oppositional rationale. Boldly confronting the thorny imperative of subjectivity, she embraced her heterogeneous marginality as a valuable political standpoint as well as an innovative personal imperative.

Her works re-activate identities as assemblages of dynamic and incomplete parts operating in the various cultural contexts that partially produce and are produced by the subjects who inhabit and perform them. Perhaps most

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compellingly of all, though, her arresting gaze fixes the viewer, unsettling the assumed division between the bile viewing subject and its inert viewed object, and returning the viewer's scrutiny towards a consideration of how, and with what effects, identity and marginality are normatively dealt with and reconciled.

Hybrid of race, sex, gender and sexuality coalesce in Friday's work to disrupt cogently the paradigm of sameness versus difference that has historically elided dissident identities. Her paintings, which negotiate the intricate tensions between identity and marginality, situate her 'in between'. A curious artist and committed idealist, she painted magic with a realist brush, and in so doing dealt with difference differently.