

## **Gender Crash: A Semiotic Analysis of Masculine Sexuality in Grant Wood's *Death on the Ridge Road***

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### **Abstract**

Grant Wood is one of the most significant American artists in history, yet one of the most enigmatic figures in Western art. His *Death on the Ridge Road*, painted in 1935, renders plainly the scene of a pending car accident. In this image, one may see a truck careening toward a car that it cannot see on the other side of a hill, and we might imagine that in only moments the automobile will be utterly destroyed. The people inside will be subjected to a miserable death, mangled in the wreckage or perhaps suspended from the electrical and barbed wires that surround the road. One may imagine the pavement becoming as red as the approaching truck. A superficial analysis of the painting might take it only at face value, as a celebration of the macabre, but this research argues that there is more than meets the eye in the work. Since the 2010 publication of a critical biography about Grant Wood by Tripp Evans, the scholarly community now understands this artist as a closeted gay man. This scrutiny builds on Evans' work, but takes it in a new direction through semiotic analysis. Other scholars have also undertaken analyses of Wood's painting, using his biography as an interpretive framework, but they have not focused on specific systems of signs and symbols. To deepen and nuance the scholarly understanding of this painting, depictions of automobiles and nature within the image are closely considered, focusing on the metaphorical content they express. This analysis regards questions about what cars and nature meant to Americans at this time. How might cars represent manhood in Wood's painting? If they are a vehicle for gender identity, might their placement and movement in the image suggest the struggle for acceptance that homosexuals faced generally, and Wood may have faced specifically? How do renderings of nature in the picture contribute to a deeper understanding of this strife? What might the content of the image suggest about the cultural condition of gay men in early-mid twentieth century America—the time during which Grant Wood painted the scene? To answer such questions, this investigation systematically examines images published during the 1930s in the American press to reconstruct the mindset of Wood, as the artist, as well as the innumerable people who viewed this painting when it was new. In particular, imagery from *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Time* magazines is used as a data set and, by doing so, ultimately argues that *Death on the Ridge Road* uses a visual vocabulary that is no longer intuitive to us today to evoke the struggle that homosexuals encountered during the 1930s.

**Keywords: Homosexuality, Automobiles, 1930s Advertisements**

### **1. Introduction**

Grant Wood is one of the most significant American artists in history, yet one of the most enigmatic figures in Western art. Many still ponder the existence of the legend, and one of the most critical aspects of Wood's life, that which is yet suspect to much interrogation and analysis, is Wood's supposed homosexuality. Having lived in a time when homosexuality was largely condemned by the broader American public, the artist quite likely alluded to the contemporaneous struggle of homosexuals generally and his personal struggle specifically in several of his works,

whether the images' content expressed it directly or indirectly. Wood's dispositions concerning gay culture in the early twentieth century absolutely surface in his painting, *Death on the Ridge Road*.

A superficial analysis of his *Death on the Ridge Road* might take it only at face value, as a celebration of the macabre. This argument, however, constructs Wood's dramatic painting as a reaction to the hopelessness many gays experienced in their yearning for acceptance through the early twentieth century in America, and does so through a close semiotic interrogation of *Death on the Ridge Road*'s subject matter. Particularly, this analysis suggests that the iconography of nature and automobiles in the piece expresses an American rejection of homosexuality, and ultimately argues that *Death on the Ridge Road* uses a visual vocabulary that is no longer intuitive to us today, to evoke the struggle that homosexuals encountered during the 1930s.

## 2. *Death on the Ridge Road*

Grant Wood painted *Death on the Ridge Road* (Figure 1) in 1935. In this image, a red truck drives on a winding road, over a hilltop at an angle that suggests no trouble on the other side to the unsuspecting driver. On the other side of the hill, though, an automobile in black drives on the road, up the hill toward the red truck, which is about to careen over the hill and demolish the black car. Behind this first black automobile is another that travels in the same direction as the first. The action of *Death on the Ridge Road* is literally contained by barbed wire fencing and telephone lines held up by eerily-positioned crosses, which span the sides of the road that the vehicles traverse. The topography of the landscape is very dramatic as well, setting the scene for the pending "death," and roughening the image overall. Over the horizon, illuminating the scene, is an ominously lit sky that sheds light upon the truck, only receding to darkness as one scans the sky laterally from the glimmering rays.



Figure 1. Grant Wood, *Death on the Ridge Road*, 1935. Oil on masonite panel.

### 3. Methodology

One may first consider the iconographic significance of the cars in *Death on the Ridge Road*. The correlations automobiles have with masculinity branch further than their mere association with industry, given, "... *men* working in Detroit and elsewhere were in charge of making cars."<sup>1</sup> One such correlation includes the auto's effect on courtship patterns in the United States in the early twentieth century. With the advent of common American ownership of cars came the displacement of authority from parents over their daughter to the man she was seeking. John Heitmann, professor of history at the University of Dayton, explains,

Calling ["a courtship custom," typical of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries] admitted the male into the young woman's private home, where he could engage in conversation with the girl under the watchful eyes of her mother... Under the calling system the woman asked the man; but in dating, the male had the car and invited the female out beyond the sphere of the parental domain. Cars took young couples off porch swings, outside of home parlors, and far away from concerned mothers and irritating brothers and sisters.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this societal revolution that imbued autos with a sense of sexual promiscuity and manly dominance lay driving patterns that further classified cars as masculine. Standards in customary piloting practices typically placed men behind the wheel of the family's car early on, whereas women drove more occasionally, and there is a body of pictorial evidence that concludes this, even beyond the actuality of this early cultural phenomenon (Figure 2). Heitmann explains, "At first, [women] were almost exclusively passengers, although there were rare exceptions when they got behind the wheel."<sup>3</sup> At the time Wood painted *Death on the Ridge Road*, the social dynamic had undergone changes that would put women at the helm of the family's car. However, despite the emergence of women drivers as a commonality, broader American culture yet figuratively denied women the privilege to join ranks with the stereotypical male pilot, especially in marketing strategies for automobiles (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> Laura L. Behling writes of early twentieth-century American advertising schemes for cars,

... gender roles and expectations were reflected in the automobile advertising of [this period in American history] ... despite the image of the flapper and her joy-rides, the majority of advertisements reinforced more traditional representations of male dominance. When women were featured in automobile ads, the message usually focused on safety, dependability, security and comfort, beauty, or fashion. It took several generations before nineteenth century stereotypes of the American woman would substantially change.<sup>5</sup>

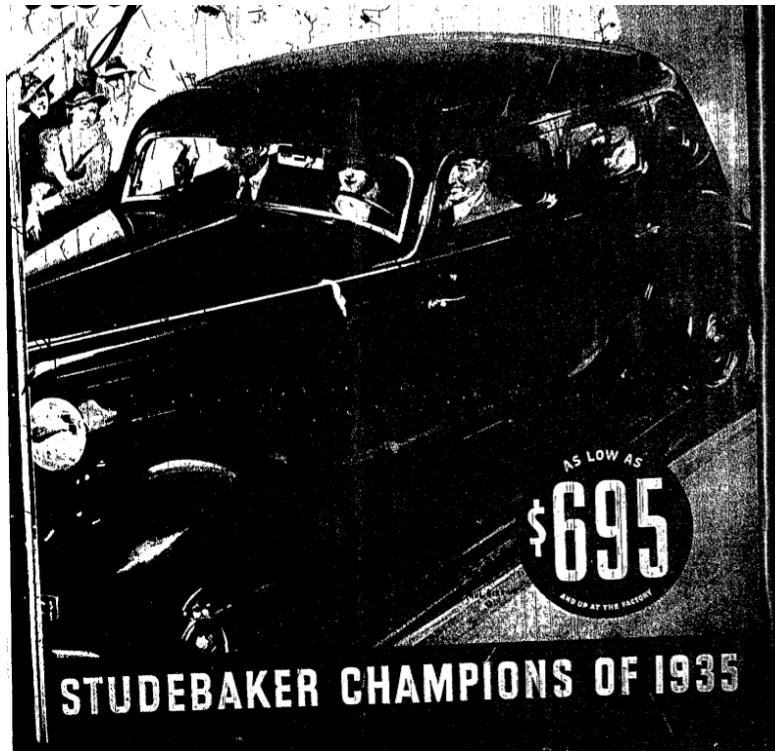


Figure 2. Studebaker car ad, *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 5, 1935. Here, a man drives his Studebaker with his wife or lover seated closely beside him. Masculine dominance over the institution of automobiles and driving often placed men at the wheels of cars. Women, especially in visual culture of the time, were occasionally envisioned at the helm of a vehicle.

The imagery of this bygone era confirms the reality of its auto culture and its stark correlation with manhood. However, it is important to understand the correlation has its roots in those piloting practices that were customary of Wood's time. Perhaps it makes sense that automobiles were imbued with this stereotype when one considers the nature of driving in the early twentieth century. Cars then were quite difficult to operate and significantly less safe in comparison to today's standard vehicle; mechanically, many facets of driving were strenuous, given the lack of modern conveniences like power steering, electric starters, or even anti-lock braking. David E. Kyvig, professor of history at Northern Illinois University, addresses standard braking on cars in Wood's days, stating that, "two-wheel mechanical brakes ... were not very effective or safe. They required a strong arm to operate and lots of stopping room ... [when] foot-operated hydraulic four-wheel brakes began to appear [they made] driving both safer and easier, especially for women and young people."<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Georgine Clarsen, lecturer in the School of History and Politics at the University of Wollongong, admits that "while the motoring industry welcomed women as consumers, the idea that they might develop an authoritative relationship to cars - becoming capable drivers, knowledgeable purchasers, happy tinkerers, professional mechanics, or creative designers - was a different matter. Manufacturers and their agents frequently used the slogan *So Simple That Even a Woman Can Drive It* throughout the first decades of the century and well beyond, in an attempt to reassure hesitant men, as much as apprehensive women. Time and again, male judgment ... confidently announced that the most that could be expected from women was a timid and uninformed response to machinery, rather than a mastery of it."<sup>7</sup> One may arrive at the conclusion that, "the traditional association of the automobile as a mechanical object with men and muscularity in American culture" was a clear stereotype of the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The "masculine" car was a fair reality, acknowledged by the broader culture in Grant Wood's time, especially in visual culture. The contemporaneous social implication that cars are a masculine object and retain an image of manhood serves as an entry point into assessing the icons Wood rendered in his haunting image.



Figure 3. Plymouth car ad, *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 12, 1935. Here, a woman is driving her Plymouth in a car advertisement that places emphasis on safety. If women were depicted driving in auto ads, it was typically to demonstrate the car's style, safety, and/or reliability.

With an understanding that automobiles serve as a paradigm of masculinity and manhood, one may infer that the imminent destruction of the car in *Death on the Ridge Road* may suggest, on a grander scale, the destruction of manhood in early twentieth-century America. More specifically, this destruction could be interpreted as the non-acceptance of *deviants* of manhood, or gays specifically. Those males who acted on homosexual impulses or were otherwise outwardly gay indicated an upturning of the male gender and the traditional roles associated with masculinity, suggesting its wrecking, in a sense. When one considers the scene this explosive action is placed in, one may find that the natural world, too, informs this rejection.

It is important to come to terms with the setting of *Death on the Ridge Road*, the scene in which the lurking death is placed. This may indicate to a viewer the grounding of the image in rural, Midwestern America. The unmistakable image of America's heartland, with its rolling prairie hills covered in thick grasses and devoid of trees, metaphorically embodies some of the most prized ideals of the nation. R. Tripp Evans, a recent biographer of Wood, acknowledges the words of critic Joseph Czeszchowski, who branded Wood's imagery as representing, "a timeless appeal to our sense of nationalism," imagery that suggested, "a healthy America," and reinforced the idea that "art and culture function best when they reflect our native heritage and emphasize the traditional values that exemplified past achievements."<sup>9</sup> Czeszchowski nods at the influence the Midwest holds in exemplifying rooted American values all the while celebrating Grant Wood's choicest subject matter.

Grant Wood's incorporation of the rural Midwest in his gripping painting may lead one to question its purpose as setting in *Death on the Ridge Road*. Historically, the Midwest has been known to typify American ideals, and this stems from the traditions and occupations of those Americans who have lived there since the times of westward expansion. Notably dominated by rural farming or ranching communities, the Midwest is best understood by the traits of its predominant population, traits including hard work, strife, and persistence.<sup>10</sup> Characteristic of these descriptors includes the behavior exhibited by rural Midwesterners following the First World War. Kyvig announces, "once the war ended ... the market for their crops began to shrink, land values started to decline, and the burden of debt weighed heavily upon them."<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, their obstinate defiance shone through their hardship, as there was only a six percent decrease in farming households nationally over the next decade, and, "residents of small-town America [still] remained close to the countryside."<sup>12</sup> More than simply representing the ideals of hard

work and persistence, though, the Midwest holds a strong correlation with Christianity.

The Midwestern population has been dominantly Christian throughout American history, and especially in the early twentieth century. Kyvig notes that in this time period, "throughout the country, most people belonged to a church, [which was] almost always a Christian church."<sup>13</sup> The association of Midwestern rural life with Christianity is not only historic in its nature, but it also reflects the Midwestern stereotype of remaining closely linked with ideals and beliefs put forth by Christian doctrine. One overwhelmingly strict understanding among these rural populations over the course of time has been the sense of family. It is important to note that the "healthy America" Czeszchowski refers to when considering the Midwest, among other regions of the country, establishes the set of ideals that look upon the traditional family structure of man, woman, and their children as the epitome of family life. The family is upheld by "decency, piety, hard work, and patriotism," those qualities Evans claims are typical of the Midwesterners and Americans moreover, especially in Grant Wood's time.<sup>14</sup> This suggests Americans, typically conceived of as those of rural populations concentrated in the Midwest, should raise a strong, God-fearing family to ensure the nation's future and overall success.

With an understanding of Wood's *Death on the Ridge Road* being grounded in Midwestern America, the frontier country most symbolically associated with long-rooted American ideals such as Christian faithfulness and labor, one may begin to see iconographic hints at the atmosphere the image paints for a viewer. It becomes clear to one that the rural Midwest denotes an America intolerant of gays, as they undermine the traditional family structure and counteract other precepts of a strong and healthy America. Homosexual pairings, unlike heterosexual ones, cannot ensure the continuance of following generations of upstanding, hard-working, faithful Americans, nor does their behavior coincide with the teachings of the church; being perceived as *feminine* males also does not ensure that homosexuals can successfully cater to the demands of their gender role, working to provide and protect. When one looks deeper into the image, other symbols and icons such as the eerie telephone *crosses* that span the highway, or the radiating, heavenly light in the sky, further classify the setting of Wood's dramatic painting as one that is righteous and fundamentally hindered by the presence of gays.

When one thinks of Wood's stylistic enhancing of the natural world, *Death on the Ridge Road* becomes especially indicative of an omnipresent homosexual strife. Realistically, much of the Midwest is flat or spattered with gently rolling hills and meadows; despite this fact, however, Wood goes to the length to make the Midwestern topography in his painting much more dramatic, more intimidating. The land is unmistakably prairie-like, yet simultaneously characterized by its steepness, posing an unrelenting difficulty to the car about to curve over the peak of the road. Looking at the auto fixed in the image's center, elongated and stretched, one can see the physical challenge it is faced with in climbing the grade, attempting to work against gravity in a manner highly stylized. Wood's adjustment of the landscape is meant to qualify the steepness many if not all homosexuals experienced in their figural climb to acceptance in American society.

Much like the black sheep in a shepherd's flock, the extended black car that faces imminent destruction in *Death on the Ridge Road* personifies the homosexual in no-man's land, a sexual deviant in an America that does not want the inclusion of gays. The automobile struggles to climb the hill on a winding, unpaved road, endeavoring for the end-goal, yearning for the warming rays of light that crack the sky in the image's background. But the car will not make it to the other side; just over the hill lays a red truck, which speeds around the bend, both blocking the oncoming hearse and acting to destroy it, as if it were a threat.

One could even surmise the symbolic potency of the red truck as the destroyer of this black car, the focal point of the entire visual narrative. The passionately-colored truck is placed at the top of the image, at the pinnacle of the Midwestern landscape on which it drives. The truck embodies the ideals of hard work, strength, and productivity, evidenced not only by its perseverance in climbing the hill in *Death on the Ridge Road*, but also by its association with industry and labor (Figure 4); Lucinda Lewis, author of *Roadside America*, remarks that in the midst of the depression era, "[larger vehicles such as] buses developed as a new transportation industry. Trucks began hauling goods across the roadway too."<sup>15</sup> Already the truck hearkens to those values deemed crucial to a healthy America, and which resonate in the symbolism of the Midwest.

Moreover, Kyvig attests to the usefulness of trucks in rural communities of the time, stating, "trucks served a variety of purposes, and small trucks proved especially useful to [many, including] farmers ... trucks reduced the isolation and increased the productivity of farmers and other rural workers."<sup>16</sup> In summation, while the central black auto in *Death on the Ridge Road* can be said to represent an idea of manhood about to be destroyed, the red truck personifies the heavy hand that enacts the destruction of the abominable deviant in a gender crash yielding the traditional model of masculinity victor. One may deduce, then, the heavenly rays of light were meant to warm and illuminate only the red truck, the symbolic embodiment of an ideal America, one free of a gender crisis and any aberrant sexualities.

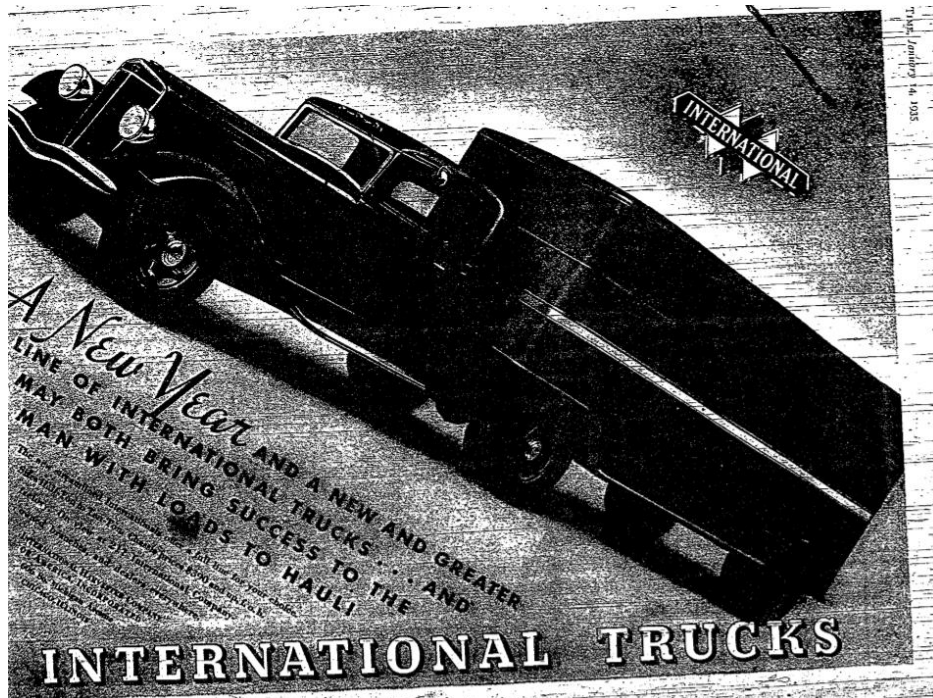


Figure 4. International Truck ad, *Time Magazine*, January 14, 1935. This advertisement indicates the visual significance of the truck and its association with masculine virtues of hard work, strength, and productivity. The ad reads, “A New Year and a new and greater line of International trucks ... and may both bring success to the *man* with loads to haul!”

Certainly, there is no escape for the black auto, the vehicle of homosexuality. The path ahead is blocked by the much larger red truck, the path behind is impeded by another vehicle, and the edges of the road are lined with barbed wire, effectively locking the automobile into its fatal meeting with the careening red truck. Implied by the fate of the black car in Grant Wood's *Death on the Ridge Road*, American culture in Wood's time met with a force that was successfully impeded for a long time. Wood was likely one of that force, the force of people, a sect of society that was altogether rejected by a culture that outright denied homosexuals much social freedom and ability in the early twentieth century.

#### 4. Data

Evans writes, “[... *Death on the Ridge Road*’s] dynamic composition and subject matter evoke ... the escalating, and equally unresolved, anxieties of [Grant Wood’s] adult life.”<sup>17</sup> Of these anxieties Evans refers to includes Wood’s lifelong anxiety concerning his sexuality. Remarkably, *Death on the Ridge Road* exhibits a narrative that closely coincides with not only Wood’s own struggle over his assumed homosexuality, but also the struggle of other American homosexuals generally, experienced during the early parts of the twentieth century. In order to understand how Wood’s shocking attestation to this societal conflict manifests in *Death on the Ridge Road*, one must look beyond the painting to examine the life of Wood, as well as the social climate that dominated the early twentieth century.

Certainly, homosexuality was not prided in the days of Wood, as it was a very recent and consequently misunderstood phenomenon; Evans purports, “Profound transformations in the raising of boys, and in the calibration of masculinity for men of all ages, reached something of a crescendo in the decade of Wood’s boyhood: ‘At no other time in the nation’s history,’ David Lubin writes, ‘had males so much cause to worry about whether or not they were being male.’”<sup>18</sup> He continues, relating the context of homosexuality, “Once homosexuality was believed to be a fixed dimension of a man’s character, any suspicion of its presence – even in the absence of homosexual activity – held the potential to destroy.”<sup>19</sup> The fear of homosexuality permeated almost every facet of society, even in the visual realm that constituted the early twentieth-century.



Image culture during Grant Wood's life rendered only the purest heteronormative social customs, denying any deviance altogether. This manifests especially in the auto advertisements cited throughout this work. Given that common ownership of autos became possible in Wood's time, the ads that accompanied this societal change became just as common, and were created quite carefully. Though it may not be utterly apparent or explicitly relayed to a viewer, car advertisements specifically were geared to sell within the most reasonable cultural understandings of the day, so as to cater to the widest selection of viewers possible; this included modeling many facets of society in these ads, such as typical family life, but many also resonated with a heterosexually-oriented message (Figure 5). Kyvig explains,

Advertisers paid increasing attention to new studies of human psychology and devoted considerable effort to sending subtle messages that simply owning this or that car would bestow upon its owner social status, power, or sex appeal. Readers of newspapers and magazines were bombarded by large display ads with cleverly crafted texts and pictures of cars with, depending upon their type, smiling families enjoying them or attractive young women draped across a fender.<sup>20</sup>

Heterosexuality was expected, comfortable, and preferred in the days of the early twentieth-century, and this is reflected even in image culture of the time. Those who were gay were excluded from representation, especially on a visual level.



Figure 5. Buick car ad, *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 12, 1935. This Buick advertisement features the driver of a sporty automobile peering out to several young women walking along the street. The ad suggests to male viewers that they, too, could attract potential lovers by owning one of the company's vehicles.

Only as recent as Evans's publication of his biography of Grant Wood has the scholarly world come to solidify an understanding of Wood as a closeted homosexual. In his early life, his male relatives would ridicule him for his scrawiness and "feminine" interests. He would work with his mother, Hattie, in the garden and learn of all the flowers she would nurture, especially coding him as feminine to his brothers and father.<sup>21</sup> Evans writes, "By his own admission, Wood was a quiet, sensitive, and physically awkward child – neither strong enough to join his father in work, nor spirited enough to warrant [Grant's father] Maryville's gruff protectiveness."<sup>22</sup> Wood later suggested words his father would liken to say in a radio dramatization of his life, "I'd hate to see him grow up to be a picture-painter. I want him to be a real man."<sup>23</sup> The "real man" Wood's father expected Grant to become never truly manifested in his character quite the way he expected.

The evidence that precedes Wood that suggests his homosexuality or homosexual dispositions is numerous. From



his scrawniness, dandyish dress and “feminine” occupations in his early life, to his tendency to affiliate with male friends and lack thereof of female ones in his post-adolescence, his family's discontent with his interests to his refute of taking on “masculine” jobs and career possibilities, from these evidences to others he exhibited in his adult life, such as his adoption of the wearing of overalls in light of public critiques on his masculinity and sexuality, one may see that Wood's compulsions, drives, affiliations and more tend to indicate his compensation for a side of himself he was severely reluctant to display.<sup>24</sup> And though his sexuality was never quite clear to those he was close with in his lifetime, it is generally accepted today that he in fact was a closeted homosexual.

Whether Grant Wood was merely perceived as homosexual or was actually gay, he certainly deviated from the influence America had on the ideals of sex roles in society, neither fully embracing nor fully rejecting the projected norms for his gender. Bearing the evidence that suggests his homosexuality in mind, as well as the cultural stances the broader American public assumed amidst the gender crisis, this critical study sheds light on how his and other homosexuals' insecurity and struggle in an America rife with homosexual intolerance manifests itself in the iconography of one of his darkest paintings: *Death on the Ridge Road*.

## 5. Conclusion

Evans writes that Grant Wood, “Throughout his life ... attempted to present himself and his work as the reflection of 'authentic' American manhood – conceived as heterosexual, hardworking, wholesome, and patriotic – precisely because he believed he had fallen short of this model himself.”<sup>25</sup> Given the subject matter of *Death on The Ridge Road*, likely one of Wood's darkest renderings, one may come to find this painting to express a more personal understanding of manhood, unique to the artist, and how his idea of manhood was met by the America of his day. The painting contextualizes for a spectator a visual summation of the homosexual's status in an early-mid twentieth century America, a status which denounced and denigrated them. Wood's painting speaks out to the hardships and sufferings of homosexuals in this segment of American society, depicting for viewers the physical obstacles to homosexual acceptance via a highly metaphorical rendition of a pending car accident. *Death on the Ridge Road* is especially effective in conveying to a contemporaneous viewer a struggle for acceptance in an entirely unique way, given the cultural implications automobiles and the symbolism the Midwest had in 1930s America. It sums up the tensions and anxieties Wood and many other homosexuals faced on their own native soil.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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