The American Art of Edward Hopper.

Edward Hopper, 1882-1967, studied painting in New York. His interest in the effects of light was inspired by the Impressionists whose work he saw on a visit to Paris. Having first worked as a commercial artist, he only became a full-time artist at the age of forty-two. He remained a very private man, leading a life dedicated to painting with his wife, a fellow artist. His theme is the limits of the American dream. There are two main concerns in his art – the limits of the American dream and the despair and emptiness brought about by the great depression of the 1930s. His subjects include empty, deserted streets, people alone in hotel rooms or seated in bars and cafes staring into space. In a word, the loneliness of the city. His work could be compared with that of Munch.


This picture was painted at the start of the Second World War. It depicts empty shop windows, bare silent streets and a group of silent people in a cheap diner in New York City.

The streets outside are deserted, nothing in the shop windows but a gaping blackness. Darkness surrounds the group in the café. The couple are together, self-absorbed, their hands almost touch but they neither look at each other nor communicate in any way. They seem passive and resigned. The figure on the left keeps himself apart from the others in the half shadow. He sits hunched up as if drawing comfort from his drink. Can loneliness be expressed by a back? The darkness outside is emphasized by the harsh fluorescent lights in the café. The darkness and the hard vertical and horizontal lines imprison the people in their loneliness. We have already seen that horizontal and vertical lines create a mood of stillness and rest. In this painting such a mood is only apparent in the surface. Hopper paints in a photo-realistic style, using smooth textures. This style suits his purpose. He seems to be saying that the smooth polished gloss of American life is only a veneer. Lurking below that is a disturbing reality. Is there a creative writing response based on the figure on the left?


Here, the lone figure is seated in a hotel bedroom. Has she come here on a holiday? Is she looking at something outside the window or simply lost in thought? What are her thoughts? The darkness and emptiness seems to suggest that there is nothing to see. The bedroom, although a symbol of the affluence she may have craved, does not now merit a second glance.

Her tense pose and stiffened coat indicate a feeling of unease in the predicament in which she finds herself. As an American, she is continuously on the move, searching, exploring, trying to push back the frontiers, always on the look out for something new.

Is her tragedy in the realization that having reached the limits of her quest, she finds there is nothing really there, no rest for the spirit? Still she continues to search the empty darkness.
There are lots of contrasts here – the contrast between the cosy warm light in the room and the uncertain darkness outside, the contrast between the plush surroundings and the feeling of unease as the figure sits awkwardly on the edge of her seat. Is the cosy light of the room merely an illusion? Perhaps the real world is out there in the uncertainties of life. Hopper’s theme seems to be spiritual deprivation in a materialistic society. We can empathise with the woman in her predicament and at the same time, gaze in awe of the artist’s clear and simple statement of the human condition.

There is a lot of scope here in discussing this picture with children, to explore their thoughts and exercise their imagination. In point of fact, the same approach could be adopted in relation to all of Hopper’s work. How does the lady feel – anxious, sad, or perhaps lonely? Why is she looking out the window, what does she see in her mind’s eye?

Perhaps this picture may prompt some reflection on present day Ireland. Have we reached the limits of our dream in the affluent society of today, and what have we found at the end?

**Western Motel. 1957. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.**

For someone who enjoyed travelling so much, hotel rooms and lobbies were favourite subjects of Hopper’s. The soul-lessness of the surroundings and the boredom and frustration of waiting provided him with much of his subject matter. In this picture he conveys a feeling of tension suggested by the woman’s expression and rigid pose. Once again we have the plush surroundings and the empty view. Affluence is suggested in the fully-packed bags and the car outside the window. The traveller/wanderer/tourist has come out into the Wild West but all she finds are barren and soulless black hills, perhaps symbolising the limits of her quest.

Her restless state is indicated in the manner in which she sits on the edge of her chair and has not yet unpacked her bags. There may be a suggestion that she is undecided on whether to stay or move further on. Again, as in all of Hopper’s work, in order to find the mood, we must look beyond the facial expression, to the surroundings.

In many Hopper paintings the window motif has a symbolic value, representing a transition from one state to another – from civilisation to nature, or from the real world to the world of the imagination, that unattainable state to which we can only aspire.

**Automat. Edward Hopper, 1927. Des Moines Art Centre, Iowa, USA.**

Here once again the mood is not simply evoked by facial expression. And again, the surroundings, together with the large window opening out into the black void are essential in evoking mood. There is an atmosphere of stillness as a young woman sits idly in a laundrette, staring into space, lost in her thoughts.

The woman seems isolated and alone but it would be a mistake to read a mood of loneliness and melancholy into all of Hopper’s paintings. Hopper’s art is open to a variety of interpretations. Perhaps the mood here is one of solitude, of quiet reflection or contemplation suggested in the symbol of the void outside the window. The receding lamps seem to be leading the woman on to a future which she can only now dream of but may some day realise. All of Hopper’s paintings open up the possibility of a story to be told behind the various characters.