My Perception Of Caravaggio’s Painting Medusa

Michelangelo Caravaggio’s painting Medusa caught my attention when I was researching for this assignment. The exact date of when the Medusa was painted is unclear but it is presumably 1597 or 1598 (The Art History). It was so different from Caravaggio's other paintings but it still had that Caravaggio effect to it. The thing that made it more impressive than his other paintings was that Medusa was painted on a real domed shield, not on canvas. This made the light and dark in the painting pop and made a two-dimensional painting look three-dimensional. Caravaggio used himself as a model and used the reflection from the shield to make himself into Medusa. Caravaggio’s paintings tend to show how the world is without any beautification. He used realism and naturalism and painted the paintings as is. Another reason why this painting is my favorite painting by Caravaggio is that of the facial expressions of the models in his paintings. They are portrayed so flawlessly that you do not have to be an expert to figure out what the painting is trying to say. It’s not the type of painting that I would be hanging in my living room but it’s definitely a piece that one should learn about.

When I was analyzing the painting without any background information on the piece, the interpretation I got was disparate from what the actual meaning was. Medusa, from what I’ve learned in high school, was a powerful creature who was the symbol for feminine power in Greek Mythology. She turned anyone who looked her in the eye to stone. Upon researching the topic, I learned that the head of Medusa was used as a shield by Perseus. I interpreted this painting as Caravaggio trying to use his paintings as an attempt from shielding himself from him. The fact that he painted the Medusa on a shield made my assumption stronger. Furthermore, Caravaggio is the master at portraying facial expressions. In all his other paintings, there is an “intensely sexual or erotic charge (Berger lecture notes)” However, in this painting, all I could see was a terrifying and scared expression. You can clearly see the expression on her face a couple of seconds before her death. Additionally, the vipers on her head usually symbolize rebirth or the renewal of life in literature so I assumed it would be the same for the painting.

A teacher I had in high school told me to analysis even the smallest detail. All things I’ve been taught throughout my life definitely led me to the interpretation that I had. I overanalyzed the painting to an extent because of what I’ve been told to do all my life. My teacher told me that is symbolism in everything you read, watch or in this case look at. I know that the meaning of the painting may not match what I have interpreted, however, I think that when an artist is dead and did not leave too much text behind in significance to the painting it is very easy to interpret the painting in a way that is different from what the artist may originally intend it to be. I interpreted this painting the way I did was because of how I was taught in high school and that’s what made me see the painting this way.

Caravaggio went through a copious amount of trauma during his childhood and that is reflected in his paintings. During his early years, Caravaggio lost almost all of his family to the bubonic plague, including his father. The deeply disturbing life Caravaggio lived through clearly shows the circumstances behind his painting. His state of mind and the trauma behind his family's death makes him able to paint the way he does. In his other paintings During the Middle Ages, the bubonic plague was something that there was no cure too and it was pretty common. Today, the bubonic plague happening is something unheard of. Or is that only the case in first-

world countries? Countries that are not as developed don’t have the luxury of not going through something that was cured years ago. According to World Health Organization “[f]rom 2010 to 2015, there were 3248 cases reported worldwide, including 584 deaths.” Although not as many people die today from diseases, a good number of them still do. Given the right antibiotics and treatment, the illness is curable but not all countries have this privilege. During the Middle Ages, they didn’t have a cure for the plague but today we are neglecting the people we can help.