



***Parson Weems' Fable***  
**Grant Wood, American, 1891-1942**  
**1939, Oil on canvas, 38 1/8 x 50 1/8 inches**  
**Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas**

### **About the Artist**

Grant Wood was born February 13, 1891, near Anamosa, Iowa, and spent much of his lifetime working and teaching in his home state. During his years there, he taught in the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, public schools and, later, was a Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Iowa. He painted the familiar surroundings and everyday life of his native state and was one of the Regionalist group of painters of the American Scene. He once said that all the really good ideas he ever had came to him while he was milking a cow.

In 1930, the Art Institute of Chicago purchased one of his most famous paintings, *American Gothic*, for \$300.00, and he immediately received national attention. At the time, the painting aroused much controversy because some felt it insulted plain country people. However, it gradually grew in popularity and is now one of Wood's best known works. *Parson Weems' Fable* was painted nine years later and was to be the first in a series of paintings portraying American historical myths. The second painting was to have been about the story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith.

### **About the Art**

Grant Wood wanted to preserve the traditional American folklore represented in *Parson Weems' Fable* when, during a period following the Depression, some intellectuals wanted to do away with many of our American myths and folktales. In this painting, Wood wanted to help reawaken interest in the cherry tree and other bits of American folklore that are too good to lose.

This painting presents Parson Mason Locke Weems pulling back the curtain to show us the legendary George Washington cherry tree story. The position of Weems' hand directs the viewer's eye to young George and his father. The gathering storm clouds seem to reinforce the tension between the father and son. The boy's head is borrowed from the Gilbert Stuart portrait with which we are all familiar because it also appears on our one-dollar bills. In Parson Weems' Fable, the viewer sees a young George looking not noble or dignified, but a bit worried, as he faces his father who is demanding that he hand over the hatchet.

### **Additional Information**

Parson Weems was a bookseller, an itinerant preacher, and the creator of the cherry tree legend which he wrote in the fifth edition of his book *Life of George Washington, the Great*. The story was fabricated by Weems, and its purpose was to express a moral, not historical fact. During Wood's lifetime, it became fashionable for intellectuals to debunk stories about George Washington that idealized him and presented him as something more than he truly might have been. Grant Wood satisfied both those who wished to keep the folklore and those who wished to expose the stories as less-than-truth. He is able to show the viewer that the story is Parson Weems' invention at the same time that he shows us an imaginative presentation of the original tale.

### **About the Time and Place**

The year that Grant Wood painted *Parson Weems' Fable*, 1939, is an interesting year in the history of the United States and Europe. World War II began in Europe in August, and in September, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany.

In the United States, the unemployment numbers had fallen from 15 million in 1933 to 9.5 million, but many of those employed had jobs with low incomes. The head of a company that owned department stores persuaded President Roosevelt that a longer Christmas shopping season would help the country's economy, and within a few years, most of the states passed laws making November's fourth Thursday Thanksgiving Day.

Albert Einstein wrote to President Roosevelt:

"Recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the near future. Certain aspects of the situation which has arisen seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration....In the course of the last four months it has been made almost certain...that it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of radium-like elements would be generated...This new phenomenon would lead also to the construction of bombs."

The first trans-Atlantic passenger service by air began in June between Port Washington, New York, and Marseilles, France. The plane had separate passenger cabins, a dining

room, a ladies' dressing room, a recreation lounge, and sleeping berths. The flight took 26.5 hours, and a one-way fare was \$375.00. The Ford Motor Company introduced the Lincoln Mercury. Less than 60 percent of U.S. families owned automobiles, but by 1964, the numbers would rise to 80 percent.

NBC, the National Broadcasting Company, televised the opening ceremonies of the New York World's Fair on April 30. The telecast was received by approximately 1000 viewers on 100 to 200 experimental receivers set up in the New York City area.

Batman was published by DC Comics. The artist was 18 year old Bob Kane. The comic-book hero and his friend Robin would soon begin to appear in newspapers around the country. The movie, "Gone with the Wind," had its world premiere in December in Atlanta, Georgia, and the "Wizard of Oz" was produced in Hollywood, California.