

Does Fear Arise From Darkness Itself or From the Unknown Within it?

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Abstract

Is being fearful of the dark just being fearful of the unknown or is darkness startling in itself. I will be analysing the works of Monet, Caroline Walker and Edvard Munch to see how they portray darkness within their paintings and the emotions that associate with them. I will also be looking dominantly at a paper by Robert Shaw, discussing the varying factors that contribute to the fear of the dark, analysing the contexts in which one might be fearful. The aim of the thesis is to come to a conclusion of realisation and clarity for myself to encourage my studio work further exploring darkness itself within art.

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Introduction

What are our connotations with the dark and are they dominantly negative? Could this be influenced by the media, or by being in a variety of different physical contexts of darkness? I want to explore this idea by observing a variety of different artists' interpretations of one of the most common fears globally. I'd also like to apply studies and psychological ideas surrounding the topic to reinforce what the artists might try to convey through their works, or even to bring some enlightenment for myself as someone who is afraid of the dark.

I've recently been drawn to this topic due to moving house. Living in an old dark house that's slightly unfamiliar caused me to develop a growing fear of the dark. I reflect this interest in my studio practice but instead of focusing on the fear aspect, I chose to paint the light in the dark, the moments of comfort when isolating darkness takes over, transforming what I'm scared of into something that's likeable and beautiful for myself. However, in contrast to this, during my thesis I will be dominantly focusing on the aspect of fear and the root of it.

I want to consider whether being afraid of the dark is due to the lack of knowledge of the surroundings around us, or whether darkness itself produces an irrational fear. I will be exploring whether it is rational to have negative emotions towards darkness, and where the negative connotations come from concerning childhood fears or fears developed over time. I will be covering these questions through three chapters. The first chapter goes through light and dark and their connotations in paintings. The second chapter discusses the fear of the dark itself and its link to the unknown in the home, urban and rural contexts. And finally, my personal reflection of the research and how I've incorporated this into my own studio work.

Chapter 1

Light and Dark

To understand the difference between dark and the unknown, I feel I first need to understand light and its purpose, looking dominantly at artists' interpretations of light in their work to better my own perception and to assist my own work. This will consist of Monet, contemporary artists, and papers that discuss the significance of the light used in the works. In a blog titled 'The Importance of Light: How light values affect an image's emotion and focus', the writer, Justin Boden, discusses the aspect of light in a photo and painting from a photographer's point of view. The photographer references Ansel Adams who was a photographer of the early twentieth century that only took pictures in black and white. "Ansel Adams used a value scale, Grayscale, that assigns gradient positions from 0 to 10, 0 being black and 10 being white." Boden mentions. He then continues to say how this affects the emotion of an image through the dark and light values:

"Images consisting of values that fit into the lower value ranges are called Low Key images. Low Key images attract people deeply. Words like sombre, mysterious, perilous, moody, heavy, strong, glorious come to mind depending on what the subject matter is." - Boden.J [2015]

This quote refers to darker images and viewers' emotional approaches to them. This is the emotional aspect I like to apply to my own paintings and other paintings I view. I do this to establish what negative connotations are connected with the paintings and how to transform the negative perception of the dark for myself and my work. In contrast to these emotions being held toward dark elements of paintings, the blog mentions that high key images (brighter and lighter images) contain the potential for emotions such as joy, free, sweet, innocent etc.

A key point Boden mentions is that lower key images will have a stronger impact when they contain strong, rich blacks and full saturated colours. It's also mentioned 'in high key images, the darkest values demand the most viewer attention.' Indicating that even in bright images and paintings, we're drawn to the darkest point of the piece. Applying the emotions associated with low key elements, can it completely change the focus and emotion of an overall painting? And is this subjective to the viewer? For instance if someone did have a negative connotation with darkness itself, would it create more discomfort than someone who is at peace with the idea of darkness? This is something I want to apply to the paintings I look at, firstly analysing Monet's London work.



*FIGURE 1 - Monet's London, The Houses of Parliament - Sunshine Through the Fog 1904,
oil on canvas
81 x 92cm (32 x 36in)
Musee d'orsay, paris*

Here Monet doesn't use black to display the darkness, but a deep blue. The interpretation and portrayal of eeriness through using the blues and purples creates an uncertainty to the painting, forcing the viewer to question what's there amongst the mist. The sunshine peeking through is linked to my own work studying lights slicing through dark atmospheres, however in my works I dominantly focus on artificial, harsh lights. Here Monet subjects us to a soft,

sun glow over the Thames while still cutting through the fog and darkness of the scene. The purpose of light in my work is a glimmer of hope and familiarity as a guidance through the darkness, here we see Monet guide our eyes with it towards the horizon over Parliament, showing a way back into the city from afar, making the unknown known. Referring to the article by Justin Boden, I feel Monet used a soft dark blue (lower key) to demonstrate the buildings so that the attention isn't dominated by them. Monet is known for his work with light, applying this to the painting, it would make sense for him to want the viewer to look at the image as a whole rather than fixating on the buildings, allowing the sunset to be seen emotionally by the viewer.

"The artist loved experimenting with the changing play of light and colors in the course of the day and the seasons, thus creating atmospheres that were both magical and recognizable." - Oelze. S [2017] CULTURE, Claude Monet, a master of color, light and shadow

This quote supports the positive emotions that may be associated with Monet's work through all the higher key paintings. In contrast to this I will be looking at a more contemporary piece by Caroline Walker.



FIGURE 2 - Caroline Walker's, Desert Modern 2016

Oil on linen

230 x 325cm

Caroline Walker is an artist that dominantly paints people from an outside perspective, capturing the domestic, and what some people would call boring, parts of life. Similarly to Monet's London work, Caroline uses dark blues and greens to convey the darkness rather than using a lot of black. However, Caroline uses a more bold and rich low key palette, with fine lines and clear shadows. In contrast to the theory of lower key elements in high key paintings being dominant and capturing all the attention, I find with this piece, my eyes are focused on the high key notes, the window. I was drawn to this specific piece of work because of the light coming through the windows. The light draws your eyes to it as you look at the painting; this creates that safety that I feel is necessary to cope with a fear of the dark. It's dark outside but its light inside the home, demonstrating a dissociation to the dark, and a comfort as the light begins separating the two elements as the day comes to a close. A paper called 'Controlling darkness : self, dark and the domestic night' references this feeling of safety in the home, Robert Shaw mentions;

"Geographical and social science studies of the home have typically understood experience of home as resonating between two poles, of relaxation and protection on the one hand, and fear and isolation on the other." Shaw, Robert (2015)

As a result, the emotions associated with this piece are comforting, warm and safe. This creates a unique way to make the darkness in my own work transform into something peaceful in spite of fear. This opens up the question 'does fear come from darkness itself or the unknown within it?' Giving it another avenue of the options going hand in hand, and the cause of tension surrounding the darkness could be the associations with lower key images being dominantly negative.

As part of looking at light and dark I want to look at a final piece in a series called 'The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II' (1959) by Frank Stella. A more contemporary piece than the last, with a very abstract concept.



FIGURE 3 -The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II (1959) Frank Stella

Enamel on canvas

7' 6 3/4" x 11' 3/4" (230.5 x 337.2 cm)

I've chosen to look at this painting because of how different it is to the rest. Here there is complete darkness with fine lines of light in between. There is no sense of what it really is, and instead of a few elements being low key, it is completely dark, so it captures all of your attention, creating curiosity and intrigue. This piece intrigues two of the senses, sight and touch. At first glance, the piece is simply lines on a black canvas. But upon a closer look, its black and white stripes seem to merge and rid themselves of any reflected coloured light

surrounding them. That led me to ponder the process of seeing in the dark, as during the dark our eyes adapt to see in black and white;

“The dual retina of humans and most vertebrates consists of multiple types of cone for colour vision in bright light and one single type of rod, leaving these animals colour-blind at night.” J Exp Biol (2006)

Moving onto the touch element of this piece. Stella created this piece by producing a thick paint that created three dimensional black lines in a striped, symmetrical format. In complete darkness, the instant response is to feel around to gather where you are and what's around you, until your eyes adjust. In this piece, theoretically, you could feel the lines to get a better grasp of the intent and format of the piece without having to physically see it. He mentions how and why he wanted to achieve this during a talk at a Pratt Institute in Brooklyn;

“The question still remained though, of how to do this in depth. A symmetrical image or configuration symmetrically placed on an open ground is not balanced out in the illusionistic space. The solution I arrived at... forces illusionistic space out of the painting at constant intervals by using a regulated pattern.” Stella. F 1960, Pratt Institute, Brooklyn

However, the purpose of this painting wasn't for the touch element, but for exploring the process of making it, as he used the house painter's technique and tools after much deliberation to create this abstract work. The stripes in the piece absorb the viewer, as if watching an illusion, creating different outcomes for different viewers based on their perception. My own perception of this piece is that there are two doorways that appear infinite, enticing my eyes further into the darkness of the work. Whilst no reference to the

darkness in the painting is made, an article by Dr Virginia B. Spivey summarises the effect and intent of the painting by saying:

“Stella’s solution not only eliminated the subjectivity of abstract painting, it also forced the viewer’s attention to the materials of the painting itself. Repeating the striped pattern to fill the canvas emphasised the flatness of the painted surface,”

Dr Virginia B

Stating the intent was to bring attention to the material, not the depth. They then continue by saying:

“The result was to deny the viewer the illusion of depth usually perceived in paintings, and to highlight the symmetrical design that echoed the rectangular shape of the canvas itself.” Dr Virginia B

The overall purpose being to draw viewers into the painting and to prevent the viewer seeing depth, causing an overwhelming dark canvas luring eyes in to explore the darkness within it. This gives the opportunity for open interpretation for the viewer, and allows a variety of emotions through the bold low key paint.

Chapter 2

Fear and Darkness

After suggesting the negative emotional connotations towards darkness through analysing lower key images, I want to now focus on understanding the fear element, specifically towards darkness in different contexts to further comprehend what causes the fear. According to healthline, an article titled 'What Is Nyctophobia and How Is It Treated?' That was medically reviewed by Timothy J. Legg and by Ashley Marcin, September 2017, diagnoses fear of the dark as Nyctophobia, and is recognised as a phobia on the condition of it affecting day to day life, causing irrational and or excessive reactions. The cause is compared to a child's fear of the dark, being recognised as 'normal' and part of early development;

Being afraid of the dark often starts in childhood and is viewed as a normal part of development. Studies focused on this phobia have shown that humans often fear the dark for its lack of any visual stimuli. Timothy J. Legg 2017

This indicates that it is the unknown element, not being able to see, that is the dominant factor in being afraid of the dark. I'm going to be looking at a paper that I mentioned previously discussing the comfort and fear of being in one's own home, 'Controlling darkness : self, dark and the domestic night' by Robert Shaw. This paper discusses the emotions associated with darkness in different contexts, how there's a sense of isolation and fear when you can't see what's in front of you, but how this might change inside the home or other places where you feel safe, or otherwise be enhanced by being alone.

Shaw references Hayden Lorimer's paper on Cultural geography, mentioning "that home can be either an "emotional hearth" or a "place of retreat and entrapment". As well as looking at

darkness in the home, as part of looking at different geographical contexts of darkness, I will also be looking at the urban and rural landscapes.

Beginning with the home, the paper indicates there is a correlation between fear and darkness in one's own home. This makes me question the nature of whether the fear of the dark is actually derived from the fear of the unknown, as the home is a safe, familiar space for the majority of cases. The paper appears to give the indication that it is the lack of self in the presence of darkness that creates an unnerving effect, despite the familiar or unfamiliar surroundings. The sense of self becomes lost in the darkness, that whilst not being able to see makes the mind separate itself from its surroundings. This is referenced in Shaw's paper by mentioning G. Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind; '*Bateson argues that the identification of the self as a bounded unit comes from seeing oneself as separated from the world: it relies on the visibility of light.*' A piece that resonates with this paper is a Night in Saint Cloud 1889 - 91, by Edvard Munch.

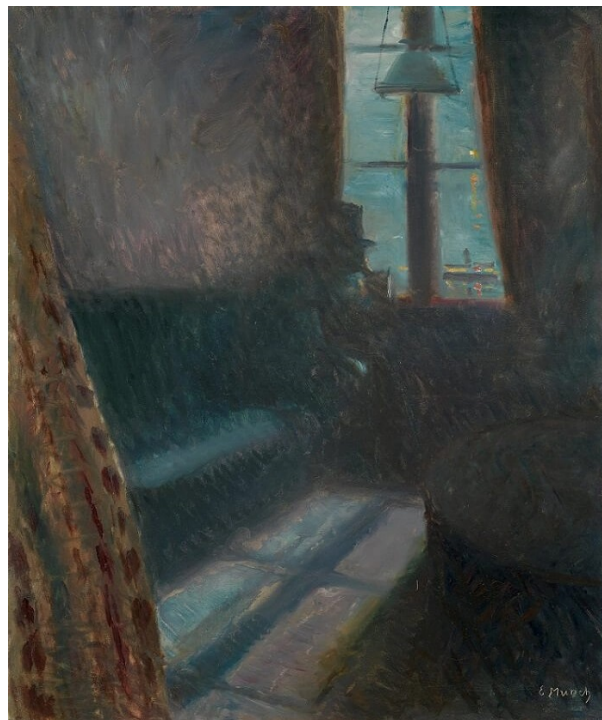


FIGURE 4 - *Night in Saint Cloud* [1889 - 91] Edvard Munch
Oil on canvas (70 x 56.7 cm)

Edvard Munch painted this during his time living in Saint Cloud, and the figure by the window was his friend Emanuel Goldstein, a Danish poet. The room has an atmosphere of desolation, this seems to be because Munch's father had recently died. However, according to an item on this work from The Met, they mention that the work might have had more of a hold on the artist due to there being several versions of this painting that were 'notable for their intimate atmosphere and evocative light effects.' This piece shows an uneasiness as the figure looms over the window, the illuminated reflection from the window on the floor leading to the gloomy black corner.

Night in Saint Cloud is a somewhat relatable piece, as it's a scene you might find as you wake up in the night, or during early winter mornings when the sun has yet to rise. The lack of light is of note in this piece, no candlelight to enlighten us on what's around the room, something that would normally be done in a dark room, a source of light being put on or lit. A section in the paper by Robert Shaw references this need for lighting dark spaces as a cultural desire; 'the technological process of electrification has been explored as connecting to a cultural desire to 'banish' darkness'. This is in comparison to how we lived historically, where it was common to roam the house in the dark during the middle of the night to get things done, and to then return to a second sleep before the day began. This is referenced in Ekrich's work, where he looked through a variety of written texts describing domestic Medieval England and Medieval Europe. This helped with discovering how people worked at night and was common practice for many, contrary to how we live our lives today. This has reason to suggest why we might be more afraid of the dark in the home during the present day due to being less desensitised to it than those previously.

Moving onto looking at the fear of the urban landscape at night. This presents a more obvious case for possible anxiety whilst in an urban area as there is a higher risk factor

pertaining to people committing crime. This trepidation has remained consistent through many centuries up until now, and has been proven to be of valid concern as the percentage for violent incidents is higher at night compared to during the day. This is reflected in a recent paper by the Institute of Alcohol Studies 2019, saying 'the most recent official statistics on violent crime in England and Wales found that the vast majority of violent incidents that occurred over the weekend (62%), at night (61%)'. Using this data, it is to be assumed that the root of the fear is actually the unknown rather than darkness itself, what might emerge from the shadows and alleys in an urban landscape, more specifically, a fear of people.

A piece that comes to mind is Edward Hopper's piece, *Nighthawks*.



FIGURE 5 - Nighthawks (1942) Edward Hopper
Oil on canvas
84.1 × 152.4 cm (33 1/8 × 60 in.)

This work appears to be set in an urban landscape with focus on what looks to be a bar open after dark. The painting is based on New York as that's where Hopper lived for a time in a small apartment. The overriding theme of this painting is loneliness, and it's a

demonstration of how lonely one can be in such a big city. The piece draws your eyes to the light of the bar and more so, the people inside it. There is little detail to the background, but what is noticeable is the lack of life and any signs of inhabitation in the surrounding buildings, by showing black windows and a dark abandoned store with nothing more than a cash register inside. The background further emphasises the loneliness of the piece, showing how these people are the only ones around and awake. The piece gives a melancholy feel whilst also creating a compassionate atmosphere, with the accompaniment of the lonely people gathered together. In a video analysis of this painting by the channel Great Art Explained, the creator mentions; 'Hopper often portrayed a specific time of day in his paintings, and night time seems a particular time of anxiety for him from early on in his career.' This is due to many of his darker paintings showcasing a saddened, lonely or distant feel, especially those portraying relationships. This further emphasises the point of dark, low key paintings creating negative emotions towards them, but also how the light in them can create a sense of relief.

Rural areas create a different dark aesthetic with the little to no light pollution, and the deafening silence of the absence of people. Personally, I feel that there is less of an unknown element of rural areas, and they feel less threatening than a city would. Whilst urban areas have long dark alleyways, and lots of people and crime activity, the urban landscape provides a more comforting element, as there is a set expectation of there being a lack of people and an open surrounding, therefore a lack of threat. Although there is little unknown in rural areas, there is a lack of artificial light. In an article called 'Darkness facilitates the acoustic startle reflex in humans' by C Grillon, M Pellowski, K R Merikangas and M Davis, they explain that the dark itself is startling to humans, despite the unknown. They come to this conclusion through conducting two social experiments with twenty five subjects that were put through varying periods of light and dark and measuring the startle effect.

'The increased startle in the dark was significantly correlated with the intensity of subjects' fear of the dark as children based on retrospective rating scales. It is hypothesised that the startle facilitation in the dark results from a change in affect rather than from a change in attention.' C Grillon 1997

This indicates there would've had to have been a fear of the dark during childhood for it to be relevant as an adult. This also conveys that it was the dark itself, 'the change in affect', that was the main component in causing the startle effect, rather than not being able to connect and see the surroundings 'change of attention'. This indicates that one scared of the dark would theoretically be more afraid in a rural area during nighttime, rather than in an urban setting in spite of added risk and more of an unknown factor.

Chapter 3

Reflection in practice

My work is entirely based on light and dark, how we are afraid of it and how we use light as a protection to prevent facing complete darkness. I want to transform the way I feel about the dark through the paintings I've looked at and have been able to do so through this research and observing artists' points of views on this subject through their art. I dominantly work in oil paints because I feel like the oil glistens when light hits it so the black is never truly black and this provides comfort to the viewer and to me to show that there is never true darkness and there's always a light and a way out like the comfort of a flame.

A philosopher's allegory that links to my works is Plato's allegory of the cave. In this allegory it begins with people in a cave who have never seen the light and all they see is shadows on the walls of that cave and that is their complete perception of life. One day someone finds the exit of the cave only to find the shadows are actually objects outside of the cave making the shadows that they had come to know. When that person goes back into the cave they stumble in and explain what they had seen outside. They are called crazy due to the others below only knowing life in the shadows. Like the one that left the cave, we have a perception of life and the darkness in it but I like to pose that in every dark situation there will be a light as there was when the man left the cave and even though you could be immersed in complete darkness there will be a light at some point and in some form. This is why in every dark painting there is some form of light to be seen in the distance. Mike Bedard, a screenwriter and author of studio binder, summarises this concept briefly;

Virtually all philosophy descends from Plato. And this particular piece of philosophy routinely comes up in discussions of how humans perceive reality and whether there is any higher truth to existence. - Mike Bedard 2022 Studio

Binder



FIGURE 6 - Aberavon Beach (2022) Jasmine Palmer
Oil on canvas

This piece was dominantly inspired by *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor II* and *nighthawks*, I hoped to reflect this in the texture, colour palette and through the uneasy feel it achieves. The texture of the painting is uneven as I applied thick black paint, hoping to promote a touch element within my piece as if grasping for something in the darkness. The lights in the background are a reference to the bar in Edvard Munch's 'Nighthawk', they demonstrate that through the loneliness there are others out there, also referencing Plato's allegory representing the light out of the dark cave.

Through observing Monet and Caroline Walker I've been able to realise that my paintings can be more abstract to demonstrate how I feel in opposition to them. Where they used realism and Impressionism to achieve what they wanted to say, I have been able to use a more abstract approach which I feel is more true to the nature of the subject because being

afraid of the dark isn't rational and realistic, it is more abstract and peculiar. To reference the paper by Robert Shaw, I have produced different paintings that convey different emotions in different local and safe contexts; for example there are pieces set within my home with light shining on the figures. The pieces set in my home feel safe and familiar whereas the landscapes and seascapes make me feel uneasy, hence why I used light in the background of the pieces, to make them feel more secure and safe like Monet's London piece, where the light guides you through the parliament's shadow.

An artist this research has drawn me to is Turner, who like Monet, explores another depth of light through his paintings. I've been drawn to his work as inspiration for the light in my paintings, as there is an angelic like glow to them, giving the impression of safety and comfort.



FIGURE 7 - J.M.W. Turner, Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth Making Signals in Shallow Water, and Going by the Lead. (1842) oil on canvas, 91 cm × 122 cm (36 in × 48 in)

As with Monet's London piece, there is a light guiding us through the painting. In this case it is behind a ship on a stormy sea. The light and dark elements of this piece clash causing a chaotic scene bringing emotions of anxiety, hope and fear to the piece. The sea is a dominant aspect in many of Turner's works as he was surrounded by the coast and

therefore had endless opportunities to explore the elemental changes the coast goes through throughout the years. I can apply this to my own work through analysing the portrayal of the sea in his paintings and further comparing the different seascapes he produced during his time, capturing the depth and angst of the sea. In an article discussing the light and dark elements of Turner's works, Koppelman. D discusses how Turner has transformed the way we see light in paintings and poses;

“DOES all art present the world as visible, luminous, going forth?—and does art, too, present the world as dark, hidden, having a meaning which seems to be beyond ordinary perception? —and is the technical problem of light and dark in painting related to the reality question of the luminous and hidden?” -
Koppelman. D - ‘Light and Dark, Hiding and Showing in Joseph Mallord William Turner’

This leads me to further believe that there is a fear that we associate with paintings where the protagonist is light. Where there is light, there is a luminous, hidden and dark corner promising anxiety to those subject to fearing both dark and or the unknown. The bible says that in the beginning there was darkness until God created light, could our natural fear of the dark be built into us? As if our subconscious is running from the idea of nothingness as there once was in the world? A paper by Crowther. T, ‘*The Asperian Design*’ discusses that the darkness ‘in the beginning’ mentioned in Genesis can be considered as the darkness within deep water and uses them interchangeably. This creates the idea that there is no true darkness, void, black, that there is always a colour and substance present but only a depth we have to make our way through.

“1:In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. 2: And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep” Genesis 1:1-2 NKJV

Conclusion

In conclusion I feel there is a distinct difference between the fear of darkness and the fear of the Unknown. With fear of the unknown there would theoretically be an accompanying anxiety around opening doors, opening curtains or even turning corners because there's no knowing of what's there. Fearing darkness can be said to be a fear of the unknown but would have to have the accompanying factors to make it so (opening doors etc) meaning that the dark has another factor that makes it fearful for people, as referenced in the study by C. Grillon. The overall answer that I've come to for my question is that there is more to being afraid of the dark than just being anxious of what's amongst it. Whether it's light or dark, it's unknown what's behind a door before opening it, someone who is afraid of the dark wouldn't be afraid to do so during the day, someone who is afraid of the unknown would be scared regardless. Personally this has brought enlightenment to my work and my mindset, making me consider my paintings in more depth as I know the key factors in making a painting feel uneasy and how to do the opposite with certain compositions following the works of Turner and Monet. From my research it is evident that within paintings there are obvious negative and positive connotations dependent on being lower key or higher key and that can be applied to the physical world where there is light and dark, meaning to some level, darkness will create an uneasiness within someone despite a childhood fears or a fear developed over time.

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