

Applying a range of critical theories, identify, discuss, and evaluate an artwork of your choosing.

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The Misinterpretation of The Scream (1893) Edvard Munch.

The Scream (1893) by Edvard Munch

91cm x 73.5cm (36in x 28.9in)

Oil, Silkscreen, Mixed Media on Canvas.

Sight is our most important sense, and being able to visually interpret anything is essential for the human mind, it allows us to theorise and perceive anything. When it comes to interpreting any piece of artwork, it evokes feelings and depth that not every person will share, which makes art more than just the work. Edvard Munch's Scream for years has been interpreted in ways considering both the artist's biography and the circumstances surrounding the work that had been created. "Painting is what the brain perceives through the filter of the eye"¹ (1) his ideology is that everything around us is not all that is visible but includes the inner pictures of the soul, his work defining how we see our own age- uncertainty and anxiety. Within Munch's pieces, it is evident that sight and feeling were the most influential features for his creations, they narrate the story of his life, exploring ways in which his mental illnesses and lifestyle were related to his art, and how his art evolved because of this.

Edvard Munch's The Scream is widely regarded as an incredibly poignant example of proto expressionism- expressing the artist's emotional reaction to their surroundings. This piece expresses Munch's own hell. The way that The Scream has been perceived in many ways has allowed it to become just as 'iconic' as Leonardo da Vinci's; Mona Lisa,' whilst the Mona Lisa evoked the Renaissance ideal of self-control, Munch's implied the dramatic power of self-representation which was fuelled by the manifestation of anxiety² (2). The Scream stood in stark contrast to the art during this era, which was dominated by attempts to capture objective reality. Undoubtedly, it has influenced the modern art world since its establishment as it still sparks controversy. However, it is possible, that different audiences have misinterpreted the artwork over time, despite Munch's own statement that the painting represented extreme psychological anguish and existential angst. This has allowed the piece to gain more recognition whilst also being popularly known. This small yet significant variation accentuates Munch's artistic talent and deepens the piece's meaning.

A key factor in this is the fact that when Munch released the painting (Scream 3) in Norway in 1895, it came under vicious criticism from its onlookers as a commentary of his own psyche. This is supported by an article written in Smithsonian Magazine. "Edvard Munch's The Scream attracted intense criticism when it was first exhibited in Norway in 1895³ (3). Some viewers interpreted the open-mouthed central figure, who stands on a bridge in a sea of swirling colour, as an embodiment of the artist's own fragile mental health." Nora McGreevy (November 7, 2021) Who Scribbled This Cryptic Graffiti on 'The Scream'? Smithsonian Magazine⁴ (4). This article tells us that Munch's 'The Scream' was negatively perceived at first from a misunderstanding, mental health was a very new-fangled concept of the time. This historical mediation tells us that because Munch's work was not depicting something physical, the audience were unable to relate and break down the artist's complex emotions which were visually being depicted in an abstract way. Maybe Munch's mental health had a negative connotation in the 1890s. The culture behind health could have been a lot different from the time we currently live in. It could be considered a turning point in symbolism for the world of art.

¹ Munch, The Scream- Reinhold Heller Book

² Edvard Munch- The Modern eye, Tate

³ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>

⁴ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>

Others may interpret the piece and suggest it was symbolism of the volcanic sunset and nacreous clouds after the 1883 Krakatoa eruption. Others believe that due to the wide mouth, many people mistakenly believe that the character in Munch's picture is screaming, but the sky is screaming, and the figure is trying in vain to block out the sound by covering his or her ears- the idea that the figure hasn't been exposed to any gender has also allowed people to imply that this isn't a self-portrait, its skull like face brings attention to it and what has made the piece "iconic". The sombre blues and greens of the land and water contrast with the flaming orange and red tones of the sky, producing a visual dissonance that heightens the emotional impact of the artwork.

By comparing the hues and patterns of the sky during nacreous clouds or volcanic sunsets to the techniques used to make Munch's paintings, scientific research has provided evidence in favour of this explanation. Nacreous clouds are known mainly for their vivid but slowly shifting iridescent colours typically seen after sunset⁵ (5). Robock believes that the picture was inspired by a volcanic sunset, as suggested by others in the past. A statement says, "We don't know if Munch painted exactly what he saw," and states. "He could have been influenced by the Krakatau sunset and nacreous clouds and combined them."⁶ (6), referring to the concept of Munch creating his pieces out of life experiences, which was shown in his work multiple times. Although the resemblance to this interpretation is understandable, Munch most likely painted this straight from memory because The Scream first appeared in 1893—a full ten years after Krakatoa's destruction. This notion has been proven false by a number of historians who point out the variation in dates as well as the fact that Munch was an expressionist and that his inspiration was more likely to originate from within than from beyond.



Even though The Scream has been adapted into different variations, each has its own distinct meaning. The artist's experimentation in selecting the appropriate colour scheme for each piece reflects his own experiences. Each piece's arrangement creates a tense, uneasy feeling while highlighting the primary figure and its agonised look for the viewer, as well as this, the scene's sense of sorrow is heightened by the swirling lines, which add to the overall chaotic and unstable mood which is a common occurrence in his piece. With his over usage of swirling lines and colours, he captures the idea of hopelessness, anxiety, and terror to the point of extremes to make this work of art resonate with the viewer. Munch illuminates his inner conflicts, giving us a glimpse into his personal tribulations as a true expressionist and symbolist artist. His artwork was a mirror of how the world appeared to him at the time, regardless of how

other people perceived it. This emphasises how crucial it is to understand that different individuals or patients may have different perspectives on their condition, course of therapy, or circumstances of life.

The misinterpretation of The Scream has been highly influential to its gain in popularity. "The Scream," which some have said to be the first expressionist painting, is the gold standard for a work of art that uses symbolism. The primary figure in Edvard Munch's masterwork is in proportion to the surrounding landscape, which occupies the space in the portrait, "Insanity" was necessary to the state of mind, and the painting became a translation and objectification of subjective content⁷ (7). Munch also describes how he was "born dying" and that "dark angels" had pursued him all his life. Therefore, it must be pointless to analyse his paintings without also analysing the situations that inspired them.

In conclusion, The Scream aptly conveys the notion that the primary purpose of symbolism in art is to contemplatively reflect our emotions rather than to assess them objectively, the symbolism of his everyday struggle is evident more than anything within this certain piece of work by him. A nonverbal image that communicates a strong expression of suffering, anxiety, and his own mental illnesses. Sight and feeling were a crucial factor for majority of Munch's pieces and what had made his work is so popularly known, it is what set him aside from other artists during this period of time. The mind and sight combine to determine how someone

⁵ <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/types-of-weather/clouds/other-clouds/nacreous>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180723142808.htm>

⁷ Munch, The Scream- Reinhold Heller

interpretes anything; variations in perception are the result of variations in brain anatomy or the impact of environmental, cultural, and upbringing influences on human perception. Even while everyone can see the same thing, we might all interpret and feel differently about it. "The Scream" is a tribute to Munch's creative brilliance and his ability to portray the intricacies of the human psyche, his own interpretation had led people to interpret it in ways that he possibly might've not even thought about. Misinterpretation has led him to become a profoundly important figure in Art.

References;

- (1) Munch, The Scream- Reinhold Heller Book
- (2) Edvard Munch- The Modern eye, Tate
- (3) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>
- (4) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>
- (5) <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/types-of-weather/clouds/other-clouds/nacreous>
- (6) <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180723142808.htm>
- (7) Munch, The Scream- Reinhold Heller