

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

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In semiotics, we interpret what we see and hear by making a socially constructed relationship between the experience, the symbols and triggers we are exposed to, and what they allude to. Semiotics is the process of experiencing sound, images, video, or other auditory or visual stimuli. 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.

Oil, pastel, and casein mixed media painting of "The Scream" on cardboard (91 x 73.5 cm).¹ The final work was finished in the autumn of 1893, and it included several preparatory sketches in addition to a painting. The National Art Gallery in Oslo is home to the original artwork; several copies of it can be found in private collections and the Munch Museum. 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.

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. Munch suffered from a great deal of illness and tragedy. He and his sister both served time in mental health facilities, and both his mother and sister perished away from tuberculosis while he was a toddler. "I inherited two of mankind's most frightful enemies—the heritage of consumption and insanity,"² he famously declared.

The Scream, by Edvard Munch is considered by many to be an intense emotional work of proto expressionism- the reaction against a realistic impression which can include thick paint, exaggeration, and strong expressions. The artistic style of expressionism is one of the main currents of art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and can be seen as a permanent tendency in Germanic and Nordic art from at least the European Middle Ages³. One way to interpret expressionism is as an opposition to the Impressionism movement that before it and as an early form of abstract art. The distinction between abstract and expressionistic art is that the former might employ "weak abstraction," or abstract aspects, to evoke strong feelings while the latter does not always give up on figurative or representational elements entirely. "Painting is what the brain perceives through the filter of the eye"⁴ 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.

Although the piece had become influential as *The Scream*, the first creation of this painting was given the name *Despair*, which was exhibited with the title *Sick Atmosphere at Sunset*, which was the first time that Munch had expressed the feeling of anxiety that he had experienced during a walk within a few years earlier⁵. In the piece *Despair*, the painting

¹ Heller, R. (1973). *Edvard Munch: The Scream*. Viking.

² www.mentalfloss.com. (2016). *15 Vivid Facts About Edvard Munch*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/82993/15-vivid-facts-about-edvard-munch>. Assessed: April 2024

³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2019). Expressionism. In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/art/Expressionism>. Assessed: April 2024

⁴ Heller, R. (1973). *Edvard Munch: The Scream*. Viking.

⁵ Autor: Iris Müller-Westermann, Moderna Museet and Munch-Museet (2005). *Munch by himself [First publ. on the occasion of the exhibition 'Munch by himself', Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 19 February - 15 May 2005, Munch-museet, Oslo, 11 June - 28 August 2005, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 17 September - 11 December 2005]*. Editorial: London.



features a guy leaning over a railing, with the appearance of a self-portrait, while two other men stroll over the bridge. The diagonal fence adds a dramatic perspective to the otherwise flat painting as the sunsets, pouring a blazing red over the landscape and giving the sky a solid appearance. Contrasting to the later version *The Scream*, it had been revealed that by Norwegian painter Christian Skredsvig (1854-1924) Munch had believed that “nobody wanted to feel what he had felt. Everybody would think of clouds”⁶ this led people to interpret the piece and suggest it was symbolism of the volcanic sunset and nacreous clouds after the 1883 Krakatoa eruption.

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 sunset⁷. 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.”⁸, 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.

However, it can be considered by some that the artwork throughout time has been subject to misinterpretation by a collection of audiences. A key factor into this is the fact that when Munch released the painting 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 1895⁹. 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*

⁶ Autor: Iris Müller-Westermann, Moderna Museet and Munch-Museet (2005). *Munch by himself* [First publ. on the occasion of the exhibition ‘Munch by himself’, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 19 February - 15 May 2005, Munch-museet, Oslo, 11 June - 28 August 2005, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 17 September - 11 December 2005]. Editorial: London.

⁷ Met Office (2019). *Nacreous clouds*. [online] Met Office. Available at: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/learn-about/weather/types-of-weather/clouds/other-clouds/nacreous>.

⁸ ScienceDaily. (n.d.). *The Scream: What were those colourful, wavy clouds in Edvard Munch’s famous painting? Scientists suggest ‘mother-of-pearl’ clouds inspired the Norwegian artist*. [online] Available at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/07/180723142808.htm>.

⁹ Magazine, S. and McGreevy, N. (n.d.). *Who Scribbled This Cryptic Graffiti on ‘The Scream’?* [online] *Smithsonian Magazine*. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>.

Graffiti on 'The Scream'¹⁰ Smithsonian Magazine^{©2021}. This article tells us that Munch's 'The Scream' was negatively perceived at first possibly 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 to the time we currently live in. It could be considered a turning point in symbolism for the world of art.

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. The skeletal-looking character is shown in a severe state of despair and agony, with a twisted face that includes wide eyes and a gaping mouth that seems to be screaming silently. This suggests the existential struggle that modern mankind is experiencing. Because the figure has not been exposed to any gender, the piece's skull-like face draws attention to it and makes it "iconic," so viewers can debate whether the figure is a self-portrait or just a figure.

In summary, *The Scream* effectively communicates the idea that symbolism in art serves primarily as a thoughtful reflection of our feelings rather than an objective evaluation of them; more than anything else, this particular piece of work by him reflects the symbolism of his daily hardships. a powerful nonverbal representation of his own mental problems, pain, and worry. The bulk of Munch's artwork relied heavily on sight and sensation, which is also what made his work so well-known and distinguished him from other artists of the day. The combination of the mind and sight determines one's interpretation of the world; differences in perception arise from differences in the structure of the brain or from the effects of the environment, culture, and upbringing on the senses. Even while we can all see the same event, our interpretations, and emotions of it may differ. Munch's "*The Scream*" is a testament to his artistic genius and his ability to capture the complexities of the human psyche; his original interpretation had led to interpretations that he may not have even considered.



¹⁰ Magazine, S. and McGreevy, N. (n.d.). *Who Scribbled This Cryptic Graffiti on 'The Scream'?* [online] Smithsonian Magazine. Available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/who-wrote-cryptic-graffiti-edvard-munchs-scream-180977075/>.