

Manifesto: "The sort of change I'd like to see in the future is one without hunger and disease; everyone has a full and happy life."

The tortured artist is a stereotype that makes me sad but no one can encapsulate it better than Vincent Van Gogh, whose life ended abruptly and tragically.

Much of Vincent Van Gogh's life was lonely and he confided details to his brother, Theo, in a series of letters. There are currently nine hundred and three surviving letters written or received by Van Gogh, himself. Most letters are from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother as Theo Van Gogh had a habit of keeping everything no matter how small, he is the reason why a majority of the letters survive today.

"Work is my only distraction" -To Theo van Gogh, from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889
Letter #805

"The difference between happiness and unhappiness, both are necessary and useful, and death or passing away... it's so relative – and so is life.

Even in the face of an illness that's unsettling or worrying, this belief is absolutely unshaken."-To Theo van Gogh, from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, on or about Friday, 20 September 1889
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It is clear that Van Gogh was not happy, he sought distraction in his work as a form of escapism from the effects of his psychiatric illness that had plagued him throughout his life.



Vincent Van Gogh's "Prisoners Exercising" 1890

Both letters are sent from Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, a commune or asylum where Van Gogh admitted himself in the hopes of being treated for his mental illness.

Here, he painted "*Prisoners Exercising*" (1890) inspired by Gustave Doré's engraving of the same name in 1872.

The painting's overwhelming colour codes of monochrome green look as though the people are under the sea, drowning in their misery. We can't see the sky only the high wall that barricade freedom from the faceless individuals, many of whom are obscured.

The so called "exercise" looks less like enriching and more like another chore they are burdened with. The trudge in a circle for an unknown amount of time before they do something else. The cycle of squalor continues throughout their lives before they are released or die, whichever seems to come first.

This painting can be interpreted as a metaphor for depression, an illness that Van Gogh likely suffered himself. Depression is often experienced as monotonous (emphasised but the cool monochrome palette, as if all the warmth drawn away).

Although Van Gogh was never diagnosed for any specific illness, there is evidence to suggest he was affected by manic depression before taking his own life in 1890, the same year "*Prisoners Exercising*" was painted.

Gogh, & Leeuw, R. de. (1997). The letters of Vincent van Gogh. Penguin Books.
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“The letters of Vincent van Gogh”
“Dear Theo: The Autobiography of Vincent Van Gogh”
“Starry Night: Van Gogh at the Asylum”

Bibliography:

Alice Snow's manifesto

Alice Snow's Analysis of Vincent Van Gogh's "*Prisoners Exercising*" 1890

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisoners%27_Round_\(after_Gustave_Dor%C3%A9\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisoners%27_Round_(after_Gustave_Dor%C3%A9))

<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/stories/on-the-verge-of-insanity#0>

“The letters of Vincent van Gogh” Book