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My aim during this essay is to discuss Vincent van Gogh as a landscape artist and how his battle with mental health issues influenced some of his most famous works. Using theorists John Berger and Ferdinand de Saussure, and their impacts on semiotic analysis, to delve even deeper into the symbols within Van Gogh's paintings.

Many would attest to Vincent van Gogh as being synonymous with mental illness, as his work has been seen as his salvation during his struggles. It cannot be doubted that Van Gogh struggled profusely with mental health issues and attacks throughout his life and career as a struggling artist (Van Gogh Museum, no date). And of course, in the late 1800s mental illness was seen as nothing more than insanity and those who struggled, including Van Gogh, were feared (Van Gogh Museum, no date). In his case, Van Gogh's neighbours started a petition to have him forcibly institutionalised declaring him "not sound of mind, and is the subject of fear of all the residents of the neighbourhood" (Van Gogh Museum, no date). However, admirers of his work believe that his struggles with mental illness is what has made his art some of the most revered and admired in the world. Parker (2021) believes "it is assumed because of their sensitivity to the world around them" that so many artists and creative people suffer with mental health issues and mental illness. And it is through these hardships that some of the most incredible pieces of art are created, which can be seen in almost all of Vincent van Gogh's works. Some of his most famous pieces were created during his time in a mental institution. On the 8th of May 1889, Van Gogh voluntarily admitted himself to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy where he spent the next year of his life. He no longer dared to live on his own and knew things could not continue as they were (Van Gogh Museum, not date). Using another cell as his make-shift

studio which overlooked the institution's gardens, Van Gogh created some of his most famous and recognisable paintings. One of which was *Wheatfield with Cypresses*, one of Van Gogh's (1888) most prominent summer landscapes, and it is clear the trees outside his window had an enormous creative effect on him. In a letter Van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo van Gogh, he expressed that "The cypresses still preoccupy me... it astonishes me that no one has yet done them as I see them." (Van Gogh 1889). The profound impact of just a view from his room is abundantly clear, and shows that during his time institutionalised, he used his practise as a remedy from the things that had brought him to Saint-Rémy (Van Gogh Museum, no date).

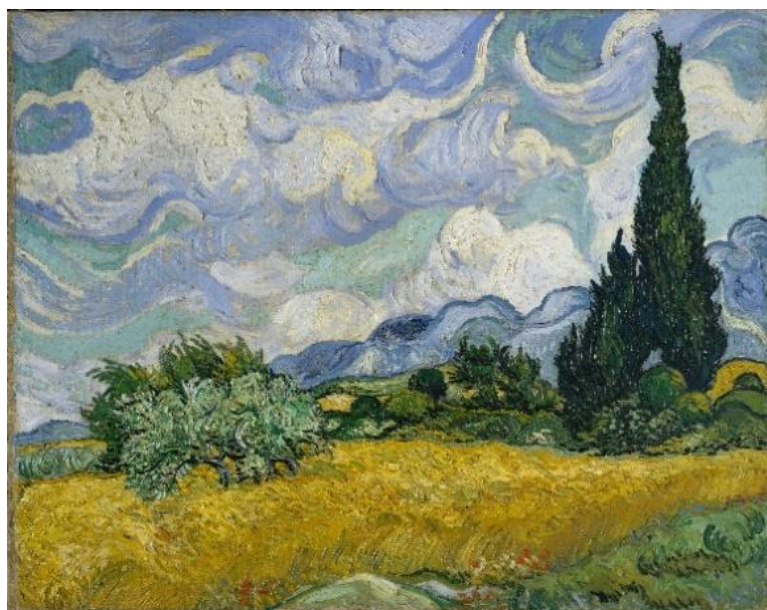


Figure 1: Wheatfield with Cypresses (Vincent van Gogh 1889)

When focusing on Vincent van Gogh as a landscape painter, we must first acknowledge a shift in his style. In 1886, he ventured to Paris where he was introduced to the impressionists and neo-impressionists (Muller, 1973, p. 51), who led him to alter his style to the more recognisable shapes and swirls that we associate with him today. And indeed with "their light touch, their airy, serene and almost elegant colouring, we might assume he had also changed his nature." (Muller, 1973, p. 51). The way in which Van Gogh creates light that seems to glow and clouds that appear to move is astounding and is the reason why his style is such a unique and recognisable one. He retained his change in direction when he moved from Paris to settle in Arles. One example of this is *The Sower* (van Gogh, 1888), one of his many iterations of the same occupation. At the time of this paintings creation, Van Gogh

was working with fellow artist Paul Gauguin, who himself believed that Van Gogh should draw less in reality and more on his imagination (Van Gogh Museum, no date). And here he does just that, using colours to “express emotion and passion” with the bright yellow sun “turning the sower into a saint” with its ethereal glow (Van Gogh Museum). Others have described it as a longstanding “masterpiece of Symbolism”, evoking “the eternal cycle of seasons” (Lopez, 2012, p. 93). It cannot be denied that Vincent van Gogh had an exceptional way of making a landscape so full of complexities, and truly leaning in to painting what he feels and indeed how a place makes him feel. We can see clearly that the field with its sower brought him a sense of peace and tranquillity where he felt in touch with some sort of higher being. It has been said that “the landscape painting is still the closest subject to the identity of the place” (Elsaed, 2017, p. 12) and that the way that a person paints it is a reflection on the place itself. We can attest that “When Van Gogh was influenced by a city...he produced the most beautiful of his paintings” (Elsaed, 2017, p. 12), and we see this through Van Gogh (1888) and his *Sower*, he obviously felt an affinity for that place and expressed it so beautifully with his brush.



Figure 2: The Sower (Vincent van Gogh 1888)

In discussing Vincent van Gogh as a landscape artist, it would be remiss not to discuss perhaps his most famous painting of all, *The Starry Night* (van Gogh, 1888). This was another of his paintings made while Van Gogh was voluntarily institutionalised, and was inspired by

his view of the night sky from his room at Saint-Rémy. It “cannot be denied that such a painting is the work of a sick man” (Muller, 1973, p. 51), and perhaps at the time that is exactly what people thought. Using modern painting’s new embrace of mood, expression, symbol and sentiment (Museum of Modern Art, 2019) Van Gogh’s style of painting how he saw the world was mocked and ridiculed during his time, and it was not until after his death that his work was appreciated for the incredible pieces that they are (Britannica, 2022). However, people did not have all the information then in order to understand the complexities of Van Gogh’s work. They did not understand that his so-called madness was an ailment and that it was not his fault nor something he could control. The reason we now appreciate his works of art in such a manner is because we understand his struggles, and see that it is this difference in mentality that separated his work from others. It was Ferdinand de Saussure who identified that communicating through language relies on the transfer of ideas; the notion of ‘a great painter’ is only understood as a concept as long as everyone shares the same idea. This is known as code, and is a key factor in understanding why Vincent van Gogh’s recognition never came during his lifetime, as he was then known and seen to be an erratic and sick man, feared by those around him. We now have detailed information and knowledge concerning different mental health issues and illnesses and understand how hard a tortured life like Van Gogh’s must have been, and we can appreciate how he used his art as an escape from all of that. In relation to *The Starry Night* (van Gogh, 1888), the “sky seems to have been invaded by a hurricane come from the remotest depths of the universe” (Muller, 1973, p. 51) almost as if Van Gogh could see beyond our world. He has made the “clouds writhe and the stars whirl” (Muller, 1973, p. 51) and is both “an exercise in observation and a clear departure from it” (Museum of Modern Art, 2019). Others have agreed that it has captured his view of the night sky past the bars of his bedroom window “and then filtered through his creative vision” (The Arts Society, 2018). And that assigning “an emotional language” to the night sky and the stars and moon that occupy it, Van Gogh “took them far from their actual appearances” (Museum of Modern Art) and instead created something new. Additionally, it was John Berger who established that how we see things is largely determined by what we know, and that meaning can be obscured by many things. In the case of *The Starry Night* (1888) and the signs used in its composition, we can see by the vast glow of the crescent moon that it holds significance to Van Gogh and is perhaps an object of fascination. Furthermore, the Cypress

tree in the foreground takes up a significant piece of the canvas and, as we've seen before, is an object of admiration for Van Gogh. Some say that Van Gogh "strove not only for force and intensity but also for beauty of expression" (Muller, 1973, p. 55) and none of his paintings shows that quite like *The Starry Night*.



Figure 3: The Starry Night (Vincent van Gogh, 1889)

To conclude, it cannot be denied that Vincent van Gogh's work as we know it today, would be nowhere near as impactful if Van Gogh had not been so significantly impacted himself. The toll that mental illness took on him was obviously a great one, and finding relief in his painting formed him into one of the greatest artists in the world even if he was not around to see it.

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Figure 2: Van Gogh, V. (1888) *The Sower* [Oil on canvas]. Available at

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Figure 3: Van Gogh, V. (1889) *The Starry Night* [Oil on canvas]. Available at:

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Figure 1: Van Gogh, V. (1889) *Wheat Fields with Cypresses* [Oil on canvas]. Available at:

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