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The Blazing Eye: Grief, Storm of Passion, and the Musical Rhythm of Vincent van Gogh's Paintings

Paramita Chakraborty

Assistant Professor,
Painting Specialization,
Government College of Art & Craft,
Calcutta (West Bengal, India)

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Abstract:

This critique observes the prominence presence of Vincent van Gogh as a key figure of Post-Impressionism movement and explores the intimate connection among his life, feelings, and inventive artistic expression. Beginning with his early experiences of financial destitution, religious belief, and encounters with people struggling in everyday life, this article traces the development of his distinctive expressive and poetic language. His travel from the darker atmospheres of his early works to the dazzling, vivid colors of his Paris and Arles eras reveals an increasing independence from the principles of Impressionism. Paintings such as The Potato Eaters, Sunflowers, The Night Café, The Yellow House, and The Starry Night establish his distinctive use of color, vigorous brushstrokes, perspective, and emotional distortion. The influence of Japanese prints, combined with his response to the radiant light and landscape of the Mediterranean, further deepened his pictorial language. The article also considers the shifting nature of his landscapes in the final days of his life; during this phase, emotional vigour and physical anguish became increasingly evident in his paintings. Instead of merely replicating the actual world, Van Gogh metamorphosed observed reality through personal sensation. His art becomes profoundly autobiographical, expressing an ongoing dialogue with himself, humanity, nature, and life itself. His color palette was not simply expressive but evocative, permitting ordinary objects, landscapes, interior and exterior spaces to convey innate psychological connotations. Through this deeply personal practice, he gave his works a fresh dynamic energy and demonstrated how an artist's inner journey could restructure the world.

Keywords: Post-Impressionism, Everyday Suffering, Emotional Turbulence, Vigorous and Vivid Color Palette, Autobiographical, Landscapes

Introduction:

The Emergence of Art from the Indescribability of Life:

Van Gogh's life was brief (1853–1890), and during this short life, he did not merely draw pictures. He had started working at an art dealership (1869–76). After this stint, he spent time as a teacher and went on to become a priest in a Belgian mining community in 1878. After encountering

extreme poverty, he began painting. Apart from painting, he was not successful in his other ventures. Slowly, in and around 1880, he began to realize that painting was his true calling, and he continued on this trajectory for the rest of his life, even though he did not have any formal training in art (Hanson 34–39).

On the November 3, 1881, he wrote to his brother Theo: “But what’s your ultimate goal, you’ll say. That goal will become clearer, will take shape slowly and surely, as the croquis becomes a sketch and the sketch a painting, as one works more seriously, as one digs deeper into the originally vague idea, the first fugitive, passing thought, unless it becomes firm” (Van Gogh 167).

Van Gogh: Sowing the Seeds of Post-Impressionism:

Instead of the haziness, clear forms, and fixity in pictures he broke the norms of chiaroscuro, used the color black, and employed light and shadow extensively. In 1876, he quit his job at the art dealership and moved to Paris. It was at this point that the Impressionists in Paris were holding their second exhibition. He gradually became familiar with the artistic world of Paris and he took up painting as his profession. In 1878, while staying with the mine workers in Belgium, he was deeply moved by their condition. His 1885 painting *The Potato Eaters* exemplifies this inspiration. The painting combines a form of realism with the mundanity of daily life, portraying resonances with Millet and Courbet and providing indications of his religious inclinations. The style of portrayal is reminiscent of Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*, with the light sources illuminating the faces like stars. From this picture onward, he began using deep black as well. This deep, thick black, which had earlier been eschewed by the Impressionists, became one of the principal colors of his palette (Hanson 112–18). He attempted to restrict light and shadow to themselves, but did not seem satisfied. He drew at the least three paintings of his bedroom because he could not find a sense of perfection in any of them.

Figure 1. *The Potato Eaters*.

Oil on Canvas. 32 x 45 inches. 1885.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Potato_Eaters



After reuniting with his brother Theo in Paris in 1886, he found that his painting style was changing. Until then, shadow and darkness had been predominant in his work, reminiscent of Millet and Courbet, as said earlier, Paris, however, presented him with a new palette. He repeatedly returned to bright orange and being fascinated by sunflowers, culminating in his series of paintings called *Sunflowers* at Arles respectively in 1887, 1888, and 1889. He considered the flowering, ephemerality, and passing away of the sunflower analogous to his own life. However, the ordinary poor people, who were the subjects of his earlier paintings, would return again and again. Thus, even in his work in Paris in 1887, his compassion for the poor would resurface, appearing in his works like *A Pair of Boots*. Two pictures from 1887 with the same title, *Interior of a Restaurant*, are notable in this regard. The first was executed in a sophisticated Neo-Impressionist style, with small dots of color. The second highlights the distance created between people by modernity. Both of these pictures moved beyond the Impressionist style prevalent in his time. The forms had achieved a clarity of delineation and were no longer were attempting to capture the spontaneity of a moment in the passage of time; rather, they tried to capture a sense of fixity far removed from the restlessness of Impressionism (Rewald 76–82).

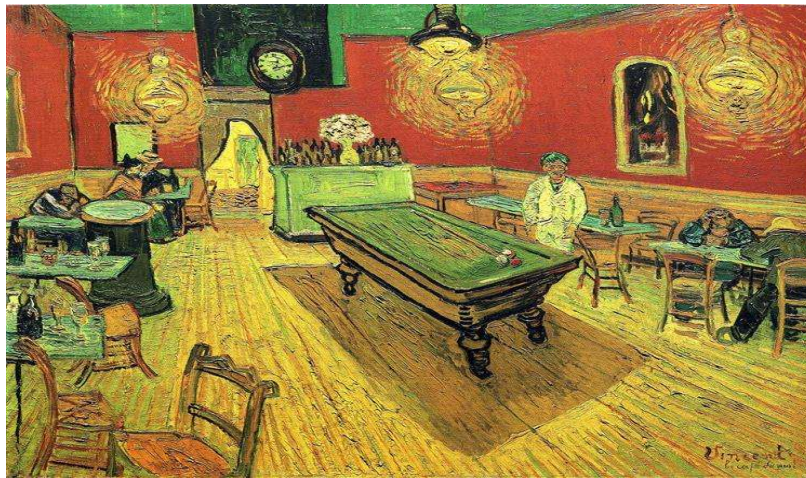
The Night Café: A Turning Point for Post-Impressionism and a Capture of the Artist's Unconscious Emotions:

Whenever Van Gogh had worked in portraiture, the sitter had assumed primary importance, with Van Gogh never using the same colors or brush strokes. His objective was to find the appropriate means for representing every character (Hammacher 52–55). The importance of the subject of the night café was notable for Van Gogh. While working in Arles, his palette consisted of sulphur yellow, blood red, and acid green, along with colors that symbolized a man trying to lose himself in intoxication at the boundaries of modernity. The theme of darkness returns in this picture. Here, too, he can be considered a Post-Impressionist, with an ideological underpinning based on choosing a color palette according to the needs of the work of art and its subject (Rewald 116–18). *The Night Café*, painted in 1888, has yellow floors and a green ceiling. In all probability, the restaurant did not have such a color scheme, and the unusual palette was an artistic intervention intended to highlight the mood of the painting. The painting is not merely a representation of the world observed by the painter, but an attempt to capture something more. The one-point perspective of the painting has been exaggerated and pushed toward a point in order to highlight the vertical lines seemingly rushing from the foreground toward the background. What finds prominence is the artist's emotions, which seems to be rush forward, driven by an unknown force.

Figure 2. *The Night Café*.

Oil on Canvas. 28.5 x 36.3 inches. 1888.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Night_Café



Another version of a night café (*Café Terrace at Night*, 1888) represents another turning point for Post-Impressionism as well, with its thick blues and yellows, set on the terrace of a café under the street, under the open night sky. His 1888 *The Yellow House*, painted in Arles, is notable as well. This house was the house where he lived. The overwhelming yellows against an intense sky serve to highlight the visceral nature of the artist's emotions in sharp relief against the backdrop of life (Hammacher 28-29).

Van Gogh had always tried to be as competent as any other traditionally trained artist; however, what and how he felt would always make him susceptible to a proliferation of emotions. More so than by mathematical dictums, he was driven by his emotions. The other works that he had painted around his Yellow House at Arles were no longer rendered in one-point perspective but rather in multiple viewpoints. His attempts to unite the world around him on his canvas give us a glimpse into the largesse of his emotional world (Walker 21–30).

The Yellow House was like a droplet of rain in the arid desert of Van Gogh's life. He dreamt of painting with Paul Gauguin under its auspices, but that dream was not to last, as their relationship soon deteriorated.

The Influence of Japanese Prints on His Works:

While Van Gogh was living in Arles, his discovery of Japanese colors and prints reinvigorated him, although he never acknowledged it directly. More than the floating images, what fascinated him was their intrinsic luminance. Arles, situated in the south of France on the Mediterranean coast, became the turning point where his work became more colorful. The light of the rising sun around the Mediterranean is renowned, and there are many resonances with the light of Japan, the land of the rising sun. The Mediterranean sun in Van Gogh's paintings reflects this Japanese influence. Even the pictures of the countryside are crafted with immense detail, clear lighting, and perfectionism, with detailed studies of grass, huts, and mountains. The internal spaces and distances depicted in the picture are rendered with clarity and precision. His style of structuring resulted in paintings that balanced light

and objects, compromising neither for the other (Hammacher 61–65).

The Use of Color and Heavy Brushstrokes to Depict the Depth and Weight of Objects:

Even though the composition of the countryside pictures is reminiscent of Impressionism, there is a sense of detachment among the subjects, objects, and settings, as well as a feeling that work has moved beyond Impressionism, largely because of its use of color. The red sky on his canvases is similar to Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, the work responsible for Impressionism's nomenclature, although Van Gogh's brushstrokes and colors remain distinctly individual, in contrast to the way the Impressionists blended colors into indistinctness. These brushstrokes added weight and mass to the depicted objects, qualities that had been missing from the Impressionist works until then (Walker 27–31).

Grief, emotion, and jeopardy are elements in Van Gogh's paintings which are brought together under the auspices of color. The last three years in Van Gogh's life, 1888–1890 are remarkable in the way they reach the hearts of his viewer. We seem able to grasp this distinct, enormous genius. Leaving behind the tumultuous trappings of Parisian modernity, he seemed to be able to breathe freely again in the vast fields of the countryside at Arles. The impeccable beauty of the Mediterranean countryside can be found again in the lushness of the wide fields, rivers, bridges, and houses in his paintings. This genius went unappreciated by the eighty local residents of Arles, who reportedly brought forward a petition to exclude him from their community because of his behaviour.

In this context, it must be noted that his behaviour should not automatically be characterized as madness; he was suffering from an illness. Whether he suffered from epilepsy or schizophrenia has been widely debated by historians, but he often appeared to lose his sense of restraint. He was quite aware of his illness, and he dearly wished that it would not return. However, the illness would recur repeatedly, driving him closer to his death (Hanson 244–49).

We must, however, place this in context that Van Gogh's illness does not necessarily imply madness or a loss of reason. We should keep in mind that he went on with his work as an artist, pushing forward the prevalent boundaries of Impressionism towards a modernity that was yet to arrive. He was then driven away from Arles by the local residents to the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in 1889. During this phase, the nature of his paintings changed in the way they approached the form and depiction of matter. The earlier clarity of his paintings seemed to fade away now. The earlier fixity of the sky, the earth, and the mountains started to dissolve; everything seemed to be rolling away, as if driven by an unknown force. He tried to capture the unbridled nature of his emotions due to his physical illness on canvas. He was fighting a battle with himself because of his illness, and it seemed that he was keeping himself alive through his art. It was during this time that he tried to make a copy of Delacroix's *Mary and Jesus* but he departed substantially from the original, making it one of his own creations. His role as an artist, as we can see, kept asserting itself (Hammacher 108–14).

At this stage, his landscape paintings seem animated by a sense of floating disconnectedness

and extraordinary vitality. Attributed to his illness, this change brought about a sense of the dynamic. The more he tried to bring a calm balance to his paintings, the more erratic his brush strokes became. Despite these changes, all the objects portrayed and their colors depicted were always clearly defined, in stark contrast to the Impressionistic era around him.

The Starry Night is a product of this phase of his life. The sky does not seem like anything seen before; it becomes a swirling circle of light. Although the mountains are rendered in black they become illuminated by the light of the stars. The upper portion of the painting is extremely restless; however, the lower portion portrays the calm stillness of the city beneath. It is as if he is trying to depict a city that cannot understand the restlessness and the pain of the artist's soul. On the one hand is his personal artistic awareness, on the other is his intolerable unconscious restlessness - *The Starry Night* takes on the challenge of bridging this contradiction while also being a product of this inherent contradiction (Hammacher 121–24).

Figure 3. *The Starry Night*.

Oil on Canvas. 29.01 x 36.26 inches. 1889.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Starry_Night

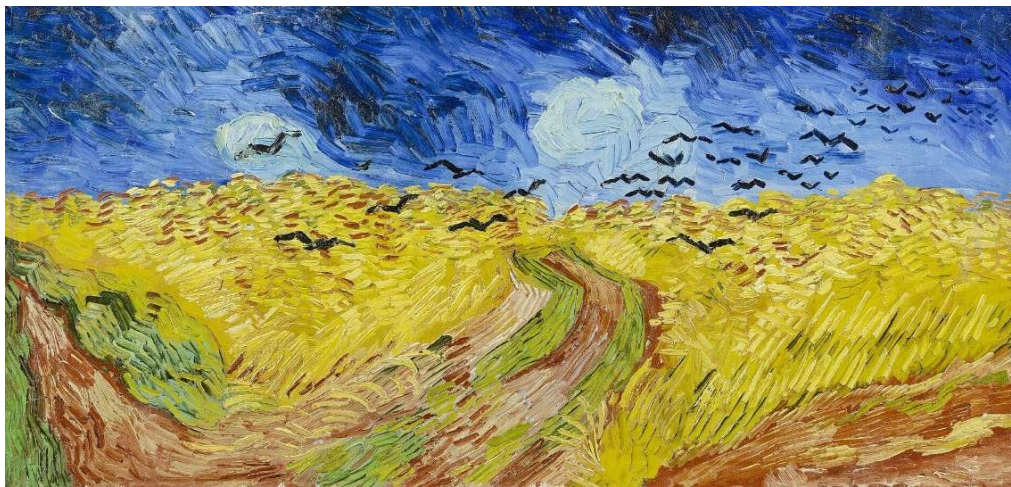


In 1890, he left Saint-Rémy for Auvers. During this period, his self-portraits captured the turbulence he experienced. He gradually returned to using blacks in his paintings. In his *The Church at Auvers* of June 1890, we see again a return of his religious inclinations. The foreground of the painting portrays a fork in the road and indicates the artist's position. His path is still not clear to him (Hanson 274–78).

Figure 4. *Wheatfield with Crows*.

Oil on Canvas. 19.8 x 41 inches. 1890.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wheatfield_with_Crows



The picture considered to be his last is probably one that he painted shortly before his death, namely *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890). In the sky along with the color blue, grey and black have entered. Here, too, there is a road which forks into three. Despite the one-point perspective, the gaze does not seem to penetrate all the way there and lingers in the foreground. The roads seem to meander away without leading anywhere, eerily reminding us of Hitchcock's film *The Birds*. The painting was executed in a frenzied and hurried style (Hammacher 137–40).

Conclusion:

Bringing to Life on a Canvas:

It is not just pain or despair that Van Gogh has captured. The sun as a symbol of life and life force becomes an important motif in Van Gogh's work, as does the sunflower as a symbol of the cycle of life and death. Yellows become imbued with the task of representing the illuminating aspect of life. These thematic elements which become important in Van Gogh's art as representative of the artist's life. He had never tried to move past the limits of modernity in art; rather, he sought to remain true to himself as an artist. His life and circumstances, as well as his persona, provided him with inspiration and established him as a Post-Impressionist. His acute awareness of his own consciousness is reflected in his canvases. He had never tried to depict what he could not see or understand merely to secure his place in the textbooks of modernity. His entire canon is deeply autobiographical, expressing his dialogue, disagreement, and conflict with himself, the society around him, and his Creator.

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