

# Vincent van gogh essay sample



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The purpose of my essay is to analyze Vincent van Gogh's work. The painter who was the greatest Dutch painter of the nineteenth century, who tried to express his world view up to the point in his life when madness captured him, he wrote down everything to his brother, Theo. He sold out only one painting in his life, however he has got more than one painting which is among the most expensive paintings in the world nowadays. I will focus on the paintings that were inseparable from his name, namely The Potato Eaters, Sunflowers, and Starry Night. Vincent van Gogh was born in Groot-Zundert, The Netherlands on 30 March 1853. He had five siblings, but he managed to develop a strong relationship only with Theo who was his only supporter both physically and materially. Vincent painted to Theo, his brother's and his cousin's, Anton Mauve (also a painter) encouragement. After he and his father had an argument and he moved to The Hague, where he furnished a studio with Theo's help. There he could learn about painting in privacy. He met with Japanese woodcuts, and he copied some of them. His family broke the contact with him because of an unfortunate love case.

In 1885 his father died and then his family -except Theo- kept aloof. He kept in touch with Theo and all through their life they corresponded. About 650 letters survived, but they lived together in Paris, so it is difficult to collect details about this period. In February, 1888 he moved to Arles and when he was there, he felt lonely, so he asked Gauguin to visit him. Gauguin arrived to Arles on 23rd October 1888. In the beginning, they could work together, but van Gogh's nerves were increasingly tense, the strained work and the inconvenient lifestyle were threatening with an explosion. They quarreled

increasingly much and on 23rd December 1888 van Gogh attacked Gauguin with a razor on the ground who finally escaped. Van Gogh went home then, and chopped off one of his earlobes with a razor. He got into an asylum. He suffered from bipolar disorder (or manic depression). A bipolar disorder patient goes through exceptionally extreme mood fluctuations which may even last for months. The hallucinations and the epileptic attacks followed the period of calmness. In January 1889 he left the hospital.

In May he travelled to the sanatorium of Saint-Remy, and later he fell into hysterics and for three weeks lost his consciousness. He realized that he was incurable. He had long, painful attacks, but even so he worked a lot. Theo spent his time beside his dying brother, Vincent, who died on 29. July 1890. His last wish was to bury him in The Netherlands. His friends overwhelmed his bier with sunflowers. The 50's was the heyday of realism in Courbet's interpretation. In the 60's the 'plein air' endeavors unfolded and the age's representative painter, Manet's artistic development. The 70's was the triumph of impressionism, Monet's years. In the 80's the impressionist wave decreased, already this was the postimpressionist and the symbolist generation's era, the decades of Cézanne, Seurat, Gauguin and Van Gogh. About Post-Impressionism: " The term was coined in 1910 by Roger Fry in the title of an exhibition of modern French painters, organized by Fry in London. Most of the artists in the exhibition were younger than the Impressionists.

Fry later explained: " For purposes of convenience, it was necessary to give these artists a name, and I chose, as being the vaguest and most non-committal, the name of Post-Impressionism. This merely stated their position

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in time relatively to the Impressionist movement.”[1] The non-uniform style of Post-Impressionisms a “ category” for those fine art endeavors, which set out from impressionism though with a different aim, but it is developed diversely. Post-Impressionism is the culmination of Impressionism. As we cannot talk about Impressionist architecture or handicrafts we also cannot talk about these Post-Impressionist equivalents. Despite the manifoldness of the directions, Post-Impressionism is more than the “ mimicry of the Impressionism”, moreover, it is the era indication of the artistic fields of painting and sculpture, the years between 1880 and 1905. We can recognize a certain world view, an aesthetic unit.

The philosophical backgrounds of Post-Impressionism were the contradictions of the capitalist social order, the development of imperialism and there was an ideological crisis. Schopenhauer’s doctrines spread at this time, Nietzsche’s philosophy was looking for a myth, the life philosophy came into existence, and the various occultist, theosophical doctrines spread, Buddhism gained ground in Europe at that time, this was the surrogate of the decomposed world view. Stemmed from the ideological crisis, the turn of the century played an increasingly bigger role in the world view of isolated, left alone people, the artistic projection of a man’s mentality was left to itself. Van Gogh profess about the painting in one of his letter which he wrote to Theo: “ There are two ways of thinking about painting, how not to do it and how to do it: how to do it - with much drawing and little colour; how not to do it - with much colour and little drawing.”[2] He believed that you had to do the drawing first before adding color.

Later, he began to use more color. " Vincent van Gogh used colour and vibrant swirling brush strokes to convey his feelings and his state of mind." [3] Despite his tragedy and illness, Vincent van Gogh painted over 900 paintings and 1100 drawings and he became one of the biggest influential painters and the " hero of The Netherlands." His most famous paintings are The Potato Eaters, Starry Night, and Sunflowers, I will analyze these paintings. The paintings follow van Gogh's development in the depiction of light, and it emerges from him corresponding with Theo, what wished to express, to stick in a creation of him.

His central topic, the light appears in the colour experiments of a day, appearing on his landscapes. Generally whole sun-discs are visible on the paintings, sometimes deeper orange, sometimes more active yellow mixing, and he painted green then bluish tones. He often depicts interiors or faces elucidated by light. One of his most famous early work with a character like this is The Potato Eaters (In Dutch: De Aardappeleters) (1885). He planned to paint it in daytime light but finally he painted it at night, we can perceive the darkness and the contrast of the yellow light given by the lamp, which gives mysterious features to the faces. Van Gogh devoted himself totally to the painting from 1880. While he lived in The Hague, he immortalized the miners' life on his sketches, and after that he depicted the peasants' everyday-life in the pictures with dark tone. He painted still-lives, which was alien from the usual civil calmness. He presented poor people's table with dark colours and it has an air of the misery and hopelessness surrounding it. His picture, The Potato Eaters which was squired by indignation derives from this era as well. He got rid of his farmers from the expected pathos: they are

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tired, exhausted and smoky in this painting. Herewith van Gogh broke the rules, which depicted the farmers as the plain and happy folk of the land. He “ tried to paint his subjects with deep feeling, but without sentimentality.”[4] The scandal broke out and van Gogh had to leave behind the Hague. “ His goal was to paint human figures that did not appear to be awkward, but rather existing naturally.

Portraying the figures in a dark room with light from an oil lamp, however, proved to be a bit too extreme for his newly acquired artistic skills.”[5] He wrote to his brother, Theo that “ I have tried to emphasize that those people, eating their potatoes in the lamplight, have dug the earth with those very hands they put in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor, and how they have honestly earned their food. I have wanted to give the impression of a way of life quite different from that of us civilized people. Therefore I am not at all anxious for everyone to like it or to admire it at once”.[6] We found five people around a table: four females and a male. Although they are sitting in a dark room, we can read the emotions from their faces, we can almost hear their conversations. We can observe some trifle which represents the poverty:

- there is a picture frame hanging on the dark wall
- one of the women pouring something which is similar to coffee
- the table's edge is rough
- their hands are knobby and anguished
- it seems to be that the pole obstructs the berth around the table.

We may have a feeling that this house is the residence of the five people.” What was to be done? All the heads were finished, and even finished with great care, but I immediately repainted them, inexorably, and the color they are painted in now is like the color of a very dusty potato, unpeeled of course.”[7] According to Jonathan Jones, who wrote an article about van Gogh in The Guardian, he said that “ The Potato Eaters is Van Gogh’s first ambitious painting, in which he synthesizes his ideas about art and society: he conceived it as a painting not only of peasants, but for peasants.”[8] He analyzed the peasants’ faces, hands and he described them. “ Their faces and hands are big, gnarled, earthy, as if they had been made out of the ground they dig. Their simple supper is sacramental; they are grave, intent and somehow excited, as if they get more pleasure and social communion from this meal of potatoes and coffee than the rich man takes from his exquisite feast.”[9] As far as the younger woman is concerned, her “ eyes looking at, presumably, her husband are extraordinary.

There’s adoration in them; for all their back-breaking toil, Van Gogh implies, these people are sexually alive.”[10] Looking at the picture we may see everything that characterizes a peasant family’s life; they are in a tiny, narrow, a low-pitched room. We do not see other furniture in the room, only the table and the occupied chairs. The space is very narrow and the figures totally take it up. The painter enhances it by demonstrating with the perspective devices, there is no air in the room. The figures bowed posture, the hands drawn up rudely and the faces reflected not only hard work, but also their whole life. The Potato Eaters, was six weeks in the making (an inordinately long time for van Gogh to spend on a single work), and entailed

several studies/ of individual figures, parts of figures, and various objects, as well as various versions of the composition as a whole In a letter[11] we can found an allusion that van Gogh worked a lot on The Potato Eaters, because he painted it 6 weeks and this is a lot of time, because he did not work on his paintings this much.

In another letter he said “ Enclosed you will find two scratches of a few studies I made, while at the same time I am again working on those peasants around the dish of potatoes.” [12] It is interesting, that he started to advertise his painting not after finishing it, but before he even started it. The critics did not acknowledge it in his lifetime, but this has changed today, since it has been reinterpreted completely and it has been marked up. Van Gogh started to paint the sunflowers (In Dutch: Zonnebloemen) (1888) series after he had left The Netherlands for France. He created the first to decorate his friend Gauguin’s bedroom. He created the sunflowers in vases in France, in a city, Arles during 1888-1889. Earlier he also created some sunflowers’ paintings in Paris around the time of 1887. As a famous scholar, Jan Hulsker suggests that the sunflower series “ perhaps more than any other of his paintings, have made him known throughout the world. They are often the only works with which he is identified.”[13] As I see it, van Gogh was keen on sunflowers.

He painted a whole series from this topic. He wrote to Theo the following about the Sunflowers: “ Now that I hope to live with Gauguin in a studio of our own, I want to make decorations for the studio. Nothing but big flowers. Next door to your shop, in the restaurant, you know there is a lovely decoration of flowers, I always remember the big sunflowers in the window



there.”[14] He also wrote this to Emile Bernard: “ I am thinking of decorating my studio with half a dozen pictures of “ Sunflowers,” a decoration in which the raw or broken chrome yellows will blaze forth on various backgrounds – blue, from the palest malachite green to royal blue, framed in thin strips of wood painted with orange lead.”[15] And also to one of his sister: “ At the moment I am working on a bunch of twelve sunflowers in a yellow earthenware pot, and I intend to decorate the whole studio with nothing but sunflowers.”[16] “ I am now on the fourth picture of sunflowers. This fourth one is a bunch of 14 flowers, against a yellow background, like a still life of quinces and lemons that I did some time ago.”[17]

“ I have three canvases going – 1st, three huge flowers in a green vase, with a light background, a size 15 canvas; 2nd, three flowers, one gone to seed, having lost its petals, and one a bud against a royal-blue background, size 25 canvas; 3rd, twelve flowers and buds in a yellow vase (size 30 canvas). The last one is therefore light on light, and I hope it will be the best. Probably I shall not stop at that. Now that I hope to live with Gauguin in a studio of our own, I want to make decorations for the studio. Nothing but big flowers. Next door to your shop, in the restaurant, you know there is a lovely decoration of flowers; I always remember the big sunflowers in the window there.”[18] After, he moved to Arles, the light of South France and the colours totally carried him away. He created his masterpieces in 1887 and during the following couple of years. He painted the landscape of Provence, the flaming splendor, the brilliant colours.

The wall was covered with the pictures in his studio: self-portraits, still lives, landscapes. Maybe the most tragic element of his fate was that he was able

to sell only one painting from these masterpieces in his whole life. As for the colours of the sunflowers, the bright yellow expresses bloom, the brown refers to death and droop. As Tsukasa Koderu said the sun is a symbol of God or Christ and the sunflower is the symbol of a pious soul, but the sunflower can be also the symbol of faith or love. The author said “ the utopian motifs or themes of love did not appear only in Arles, but earlier in Paris in 1887. Sunflowers and couples in the garden were already present in van Gogh’s iconography in 1887.”[19]

In the ‘ series’ van Gogh painted similar paintings, but there are some differences. For example, there are two similar paintings of sunflowers, they have got the same titles but here we can find differences:

1. There are differences in the petal structure on a few of the flowers. On the left side there is a V structure which we cannot find on the right side.
2. On the left, the center of the flower is green, however, on the right side it is black or dark brown.
3. In the first picture the leafy structure is yellow, while in the second one it is brown.
4. “ The leaf located in bubble number four is nearly identical in both pieces; however in the first piece it is overlapped by the large drooping flower and is green in color. In the second piece there is a small but clear gap between the drooping flower and the leaf, and the leaf is black in color.” [20]

Although the sunflower paintings are similar to each other, still every painting is unique and “ different”. Vincent van Gogh’s best-known and most popular pictures were painted in a short period, at the end of his life, between 1888 and 1890. As I mentioned, he moved to France in February, 1888 where the Mediterranean landscape, the intensive lights and the colours had an enormous effect on his painting.

He painted everything that he saw around himself, for example: people, buildings, interiors, flowers, or even his own shoes. He particularly shared in a big attention the landscape of Provence because he was inspired by the light and colour. He painted the *Starry Night Over the Rhone in Arles* in 1888 and he “ wanted to demonstrate that night subjects should be done at night on the spot rather than during the day in the studio, and that a whole range of colors- not just blue-black- was to be found in them; he was also surely questioning the stated practices of the American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) in his *Nocturnes*.”[21] The view is from the quay on the east side of the Rhone. “ The village and church in the *Starry Night* are often said to be based on a drawing showing a panoramic view of Saint-Rémy.”[22]

The daytime brightness of the Mediterranean sky absorbed his attention as the evening, night sky phenomena which he fixed with surprising precision. In his painting, *Road with Cypress and Star* (1890) there are three luminaries: the Moon and two stars. Some astronomers examined that van Gogh actually depicted a real celestial bodies on the canvas. They were led to the conclusion that – presumably from compositional reasons – he reflected the celestial bodies, so the correct order from left to right is Moon, Venus, Merkur. It was possible to see this beautiful conjunction on this evening only because of the fast motion of the Moon. This research team manifested that van Gogh has got another painting, *The White House at Night* (1890) where he also painted the Venus. We can find a lot of paintings which have also got an astronomical reference, as his well-known picture,

the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* (1888), in which we may identify the constellations of the early autumn sky surprisingly well.

In the same year, he painted the *Cafe Terrace at Night* where the single piece of the starry sky is visible. In the painting *Starry Night* (In Dutch: *De sterrennacht*) (1889) we may see the sky with strange whirling going ahead. We would not expect it, but the model of the work was the real sky. “ The starry night was chosen as one of the typical examples of the conflict between the two opposing themes of Christianity and nature.”[23] In his letter which was addressed to Theo, he said: “ Included a small sketch of a 30 square canvas - in short the starry sky painted by night, actually under a gas jet. The sky is aquamarine, the water is royal blue, the ground is mauve. The town is blue and purple. The gas is yellow and the reflections are russet gold descending down to green-bronze. On the aquamarine field of the sky the Great Bear is a sparkling green and pink, whose discreet paleness contrasts with the brutal gold of the gas. Two colourful figurines of lovers in the foreground.”[24]

In conclusion, he is one of the most famous painters, however as usual, in his lifetime he was not popular and acknowledged. He wanted to paint the dark of the night and the stealthy lights. He believed that in spite of the darkness, the colours are able to appear with deep intensity in the starry sky, the faces or any other surfaces. Van Gogh could not compromise and was not able to subordinate himself to anything. Impressionists did not acknowledge him and they laughed at him, but in his paintings we can discover almost every sign of the coming artistic fields. He belonged to the artists who were acknowledged only after their death.

Firstly, the Germans organized a series of exhibitions from his pictures in 1905 and 1906 from Hamburg to Berlin. From that time onwards he was considered as the forerunner of expressionism. However he has almost 850 paintings and about 1000 drawings, so the chances are that many of his works perished. After the La Tambourin theatre's liquidation- where he exhibited his pictures- they threw off some of his paintings/drawings. In 1987 they sold out his paintings: Irises, for 53, 9 million dollar[25], in 1998 the Self-portrait without beard, for 71, 5 million dollar, in 1990 the Portrait of Dr. Gachet, for 82, 5 million dollar. Now the Portrait of Dr. Gachet is among " the 10 most expensive paintings in the world".

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[25] The U. S. dollar has inflated quite a bit since 1987, when Van Gogh's

Irises sold for \$53.9 million. Today, that \$53.9 million is worth roughly \$102.

3 million. ([http://stylecrave.com/2008-11-24/the-15-most-expensive-](http://stylecrave.com/2008-11-24/the-15-most-expensive-paintings-in-the-world/)

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