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Compare/Contrast Essay;

*Starry Night* and *The Scream*

During the phase from the late 19th to early 20th century, the Post-Impressionism emerged, a unique avant-garde art with artists’ independent personal aesthetics that sought to progress beyond the narrow imitative style of empirical Realism and Impressionism. This style was derived from a group of young painters such as Paul Gauguin and Georges Seurat in order to create more monumental and universal art (Davies et al. 528). Furthermore, right after the rise of the Post-Impressionism, a strange dreamlike imagery called Symbolism appeared. This Symbolist otherworldly aesthetic of fantasy, escapism and psychology that rejected Naturalism and Realism flourished throughout Europe (Collins). In fact, Vincent Van Gogh, Dutch painter, was one of the pioneers of Post-Impressionism while Edvard Munch, Norwegian painter, was also associated with the international development of Symbolism and recognized as a precursor of Expressionism (Hood). In this essay, I will compare and contrast two of their legendary masterpieces, both of which reflect the artists’ nervousness, but depict different atmospheres of scenery: The first is *Starry Night* by Vincent Van Gogh drawn in 1889, and the second is T*he Scream* by Edvard Munch drawn in 1893.

Both Gogh and Munch, who are pioneers of Post-Impressionism and Symbolism, struggled with insanity during their lifetimes, and consequently painted ominous imageries with swirling energy, which reflect their unstable mental states. Gogh was such a deeply troubled and depressed man who inconsistently yearned for universal harmony and humanitarian craving. Consequently, majority of his paintings mirrors his intense, uncontrollable emotions which accentuate personal symbolic vocabulary in expressionistic ways (Davies et al. 534). This is well represented in his painting, *Starry Night*. Compared to other beautifully depicted objects in the background, there is the most eye-catching and ambiguous large cypress tree dominating the foreground. Because this was painted during a sad period of Gogh’s life, the sinister presence of the massive dark isolated tree would surely reflect the depressed artist. Moreover, Munch also explored the expressive representation of emotions and personal relationships as he extended the obsessive personal nature of his subjects into universal symbols of emotional states (Hood). In *The Scream*, he showed an honest and ugly glimpse of his inner troubles and feeling of his anxiety. The main figure, unappealing androgynous creature clasping hands to a skull-like head, is gasping with expressions of fear and anxiety. Since he struggled with insanity not only on a personal level, but also through his family, it is clear that he put more importance on personal meaning in his painting then on technical skill or traditional view of beauty (Shabi).

However, *Starry Night* portrays peaceful and beautiful scenery with shining stars in a nocturnal sky whereas *The Scream* captures a horrifying anxiety of a grotesquely compressed writhing figure. Also, the colors used in each painting create totally antithetical atmospheres. Closely examining Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, this painting has strong religious overtones since Gogh attempted to draw the utopia with the peaceful tranquility of unpretentious people living in nature and harmony, all of which he dreamed (Davies et al. 534). The night sky is filled with spectacular cosmic events – joyous swirling clouds, luminescent stars with yellow haloes. Below the sky and rolling hills of the horizon lies a small town, snugly ensconced in a valley. Gogh uses exaggerated and thick sweeping brushstrokes to visualize what he wanted the world to be. In fact, he conveys the strong feelings of hope through the bright lights of the stars shining down the dark nocturnal landscape, other than just insanity and isolation (Shabi). However, in *The Scream*, everything is twirling and swirling with dark vivid colors which create a threatening dismal atmosphere. This scene is also believed to be prompted by the violent eruption of the Indonesian volcano Krakatoa in 1883. Witnessing such an apocalyptic display of colors in Oslo, Munch might have intended to depict the ugly sounds of living beings undergoing both physical and emotional sufferings in the modern age through bright exaggerated colors and simplistic shapes (Shabi).

To conclude, both Gogh and Munch are representative artists of the late 19th and early 20th century who each developed Post-Impressionism and Symbolism. Both of the artists suffered from craziness, but their hysteria eventually made them to create two of the most reproduced and famous pieces of art in the world today: *Starry Night* embodies an inner, subjective expression of Gogh’s response to nature, and *The Scream* deals with awe-inspiring nature and emotional life, presumably applicable to all modern humans.

Works Cited

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