

From Van Gogh's Paintings to the Solitude of Mental Illness

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Introduction

Vincent Van Gogh, one who is widely known for his emotionally charged paintings and distinctive style, has remained one of the most influential figures in art history. It is also a common notice that his artistic experiences were inseparable from his personal struggles with mental illness and social alienation. Though his career was relatively short, it was filled with bursts of artistic brilliance interrupted by phases of emotional instability and harmful behavior. The common narrative of viewing Van Gogh as a tragic genius is quite compelling, yet it oversimplifies the complexity of his life and work. While his mental illness undoubtedly influenced his career, it is still essential to examine the broader historical, medical, and social factors that had shaped his experiences. Although, many researches have been made to dig into the intrinsic relationship between Van Gogh's historical background and his mental illness, yet, few people have explored the relevance of these factors to the content of his paintings. Therefore, this essay aims to provide a thorough understanding towards Van Gogh's art by analyzing his expression of solitude as both a personal sorrow and an artistic theme. By examining his use of color, composition, and brushwork, how Van Gogh's paintings serve as visual illustrations of his inner world will be explored, and the conventional interpretations, such as viewing his art work merely as expressions of madness, will be criticized. Instead, his art will be regarded as a well-structured method of engaging with his psychological reality. As a result, this essay emphasizes the role of solitude that played in Van Gogh's artistic creation, which is deeply influenced by the interaction of his mental illness and sociological backgrounds, offering a deeper appreciation of Van Gogh's contribution to art and human understanding.

Literature Review

Throughout the years, many art historians, psychiatrists, and cultural theorists have deeply examined Van Gogh's artistic

and psychological struggles. Researchers have been focusing on diagnosing his mental condition after his death, proposing various mental health disorders, including bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and temporal lobe epilepsy (Smith et al., 2023). The impact of his illness on his process of art creation was emphasized by these studies, suggesting that his heightened emotional states contributed greatly to both his artistic innovations and personal sufferings (Lee & Hwang, 2022). Beyond medical analysis, the sociocultural context of 19th-century Europe was also explored together with its immature medical treatments. Van Gogh's experiences in mental hospitals, particularly at Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, clearly reflected the limitations of contemporary mental healthcare, which prioritized physical confinement over effective medical treatments (Pribram, 2017). Lacking external support available to individuals with mental illnesses at the time, forced him to rely on his personal coping mechanisms, such as writing letters and painting. Further studies examined Van Gogh's use of color and composition as expressions of psychological distress. His emotional intensity within the paintings is often created through exaggerated hues and distorted perspectives, such as *The Night Café* (1888) and *Bedroom in Arles* (1888). Art historians suggested that these stylistic choices were not merely aesthetic but served as a method of communicating his internal struggles (Yuliya et al., 2020). Likewise, his landscape paintings, such as *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890), have been interpreted as visual metaphors for isolation, existential despair (Bakker, van Tilborgh, & Prins, 2016). Though Van Gogh was commonly viewed as a suffering artist, recent scholars have moved beyond this romanticized notion of him, instead, they managed to put his work into a broader artistic and psychological framework. Lewis (2017) believed that Van Gogh's solitude was not a passive experience that merely cries for help but an active and positive engagement with his emotional state. By shifting the focus from his illness to his artistic intention, these studies can offer a more comprehensive understanding on both Van Gogh's works and his lasting impact on both art and mental health treatment.

Van Gogh's Mental Solitude and his historical background

Vincent van Gogh's mental illness and social struggles were deeply intertwined, shaping both his artistic output and personal hardships. His psychological distress, though poorly understood in his time, influenced how he viewed the world and expressed it through art. Meanwhile, the medical, cultural, and artistic environment of 19th-century Europe shaped both his experience of illness and his later reputation. His time period lacked modern psychiatric understanding, which means that the treatment approaches were often prioritized harmful containment over helpful therapies. Therefore, patients like Van Gogh usually face long-term hospitalization with limited treatment options, relying on personal coping mechanisms such as art as an emotional outlet. However, Van Gogh's struggles were not only medical but also deeply social. Beyond natural biological vulnerabilities, Van Gogh's mental illness was likely aggravated by the social rejection and isolation he faced throughout his life. The alienation he experienced, not only from art circles and local communities, but even his close companions, this might have intensified his emotional instability, further fueling the cycles of mania and depression that shaped his artistic production (Lee & Hwang, 2022, p. 1). His inability to gain recognition during his lifetime compounded his distress. Van Gogh sold only one painting, and his work was largely dismissed by the Parisian art scene, which favored Impressionism and academic painting. This artistic rejection not only affected his career but also contributed to his worsening mental state, forcing him to rely on his brother Theo's financial support and emotional encouragement. This frustration, combined with his fragile mental health, not only shaped Van Gogh's sense of self but also became a defining element of his artistic expression. Art was not just a career for Van Gogh but a means of survival, a personal therapy, and a way to channel his inner turmoil into something tangible. His paintings, therefore, provided the audience a visual narrative of his psychological struggles and personal solitude, reflecting his fluctuating emotional states and offering insight into his complex mind.

Apart from the social impact, Van Gogh's artistic career was closely connected to his psychological state. Through sociological researches, we can develop a comprehensive understanding of how Van Gogh's mental struggles, medical treatment, and social environment shaped his life, and therefore, scholars are able to move beyond the stereotype of the simplistic romanticized narratives. During the time in Saint-Paul-de-Mausole, Van Gogh had experienced severe mood swings, he experienced both auditory and visual hallucinations, paranoia, and had self-destructive tendencies, these issues were all documented in his letters and medical records. Modern psychiatrists and art historians continued to debate the nature of his illness. Some researchers suggested that Van Gogh's obvious symptoms are consistent with bipolar disorder, characterized by episodes of extreme mania and depression. This pattern implies that periods of intense creativity could be followed by episodes of severe exhaustion and emotional instability. Lee & Hwang (2022) argued that Van Gogh's heightened creativity increased during hypomanic states, hence contributing to rapid bursts of art production, while depressive episodes led to a significant decrease in his work. This strengthens the idea that his artistic output was greatly affected by his psychological state (p. 1). However, this conclusion was not entirely true, for the output of Van Gogh's work should not be evaluated by merely the amount but also qualities. Obviously, paintings drawn within his depression periods, such as *Wheatfield with Crows* and *The Starry Night*, own more delicate brushstrokes and colors, which are known for their high quality. At the same time, the medical and cultural perceptions of mental illness during 19th century shaped his struggles. Researchers such as Pribram (2017), explored the connection between Van Gogh's emotional suffering, artistic genius, and mental illness, his symptoms of hallucinations and mood swings should suggest a complex emotional disorder instead of a singular diagnosis (p. 10). Some scholars have also investigated on Van Gogh's neurological damage from childhood trauma and the lead poisoning from paint, and proposed that Van Gogh should

consequently be suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy (p. 13). However, Smith et al. (2023) stressed that Van Gogh's symptoms were similar to multiple psychiatric conditions, including mood disorders and borderline personality disorder traits. It is quite arbitrary to give out a conclusive diagnosis of schizoaffective disorder, the relationship of the mental health challenges for his delusions, paranoia, and hallucinations, combined with depressive states is apparently complex (p. 781). In many ways, Van Gogh's artistic production was a direct reflection of his psychological struggles. His best-known works were both created from periods of emotional turbulence and creativity, emphasized the deep connection between mental illness and artistic expression. However, beyond his personal struggles, the broader social, medical, and cultural forces that shaped his experience of mental illness were also crucial factors to take into consideration. His suffering was not merely a product of his own mind but was deeply influenced by the historical context in which he lived.

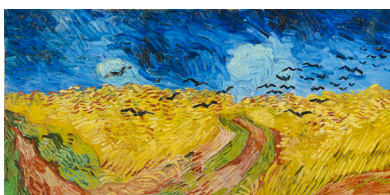
Apparently, it is essential to view Van Gogh's psychological struggles through medical perspectives, but it's difficult to have a more thorough understanding without considering the social and cultural conditions that shaped his experiences. In an era where psychiatric therapy was significantly unscientific, it is not an uncommon phenomenon for individuals with mental illness been excluded from the society. However, Van Gogh's response to this alienation was not passive suffering but a radical transformation of his solitude into artistic expression. His paintings were not just reflections of his psychological distress but deliberate acts of reclaiming his reality through art. His urgent need to express his emotions was illustrated by the use of bold colors and dynamic brushstrokes, criticizing both the artistic conventions of his time and the indifference of the society. A broader issue emerges when considering the extent to which society shapes an artist's suffering. Van Gogh's story is often romanticized as the tragedy of an unrecognized genius, yet this perspective overlooks the sociological factors that contributed to his failure at that time. The 19th century European society failed to accommodate

mental illness, which had had a significant impact on Van Gogh's fate. Proper medical treatment and social support could have changed his path, yet his existence was defined by the sufferings expressed by his artistic vision. Rather than viewing his struggles as an inevitable consequence of genius, it is still necessary to recognize how certain historical background can shape one's lifetime struggling and his related professional career. Van Gogh's biography forces us to reconsider the ways in which art, mental illness, and social structures intersect. His works remain as both a testament to personal misery and a critique of the world that failed him.

Van Gogh's Artistic Expression of Solitude



Langlois Bridge at Arles ^[fig 1]
 Van Gogh, V. (1888)
 Oil on canvas, 54 × 65 cm
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo



Wheatfield with Crows ^[fig 2]
 Van Gogh, V. (1890)
 Oil on canvas, 50.2 × 103 cm
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
The painting was historically misinterpreted as Van Gogh's last work, contributing to narratives about his declining mental health. However, later research has demonstrated that Tree Roots was likely his final painting (Naifeh & Smith, 2011, p. 450).

In Van Gogh's paintings, his artistic composition, choice of themes, and expressive drawing techniques often convey a sense of solitude. In the final years of his life, Van Gogh produced a vast number of works, each offering a unique perspective on loneliness and reflecting his personal understanding of isolation. In 1888, *Langlois Bridge at Arles* ^[fig 1] was published, it was often interpreted as a serene yet melancholic landscape, which successfully reflected the artist's deep sense of solitude. Unlike his more turbulent works, such as *The Starry Night* or *Wheatfield with Crows*, this painting employs a soft and mild palette and a tranquil setting. However, beneath the stillness lies an underlying theme of disconnection, emphasizing Van Gogh's multiple artistic exploration towards isolation. The bridge, which traditionally symbolizes connection, now serves as a visual barrier in this painting. The structure dominates the middle ground, dividing the painting into two separate parts: the human world (represented by the small figures crossing the bridge) and the natural world (the water and sky). The human figures were drawn with minimal details, stressing their insignificance within the broader environment. This detachment mirrors Van Gogh's personal struggles with social isolation and his difficulty in forming lasting relationships. In contrast, *Wheatfield with Crows* ^[fig 2] (1890) creates a sense of entrapment and unease. The wheatfield stretches across the

foreground, appearing vast yet confined, as if there was no escape. Three forking paths cut through the field, leading to nowhere definite, mirroring uncertainty and loss of direction. This lack of a clear destination could possibly be a reflection of Van Gogh's own emotional unrest in his final days. The paths that lead nowhere could symbolize the choices he faced near the end of his life, particularly his struggles with mental illness and uncertainty about the future. As the painting was known as Van Gogh's posthumous work (which was proved as a false information), many scholars have dug deep into the artwork and over-interpreted it. Some argue that the painting represents existential despair, as the crows symbolize death and impending doom, while others believe that the crows in flight indicate movement and transcendence, capturing the tension between resignation and escape. However, in the book *On the Verge of Insanity*, this composition, rather than depicting a literal place, represents an emotional landscape - an outward projection of Van Gogh's sense of despair and isolation (Bakker, van Tilborgh, & Prins, 2016, p. 18). These interpretations revealed the complexity of Van Gogh's solitude, which was neither purely despairing nor entirely passive but instead an evolving condition that found expression through artistic form. Lewis (2017) suggested that Van Gogh's works challenge traditional narratives of mental illness. Rather than seeing his art as a cry for help, Lewis encourages viewing it as a form of agency, a means through which Van Gogh actively shaped his own experiences and emotions into something communicable (p. 2). Although, this interpretation aligns with the idea that the crows may not solely represent doom, but rather an attempt to visualize inner conflict and transformation, his argument risks overcorrection by fading the role mental illness likely played in shaping Van Gogh's life and work. While agency is a valuable perspective, it may unintentionally minimize the very real suffering documented in Van Gogh's letters, such as his struggles and self-harm tendencies. For example, his infamous act of cutting off his ear, a moment of extreme crisis, suggests a loss of agency that complicates Lewis's thesis. Moreover, Van Gogh also tried to extend his solitude from a personal feeling



The Sower ^[fig 3]
 Van Gogh, V. (1888)
 Oil on canvas, 32 × 40.5 cm
 Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

to a larger perspective, *The Sower* (1888) and *The Harvest* (1888) have shown us his persistence in resolving emotional conflict between human and nature by picturing the vision of agricultural laborers within vast landscapes. The painting, *The Sower* ^[fig 3], features a solitary figure sowing seeds against the backdrop of a setting sun, which dominates the upper half of the canvas. The sower is small compared to the vast landscape, and the sharp diagonal division between the wheat field and the sky creates tension, visually separating the man from his environment. Furthermore, the heavy, exaggerated movement of the figure suggests both endurance and isolation - his labor is essential yet deeply solitary. As a psychological interpretation, the setting sun suggests finality, leading some art historians to view this painting as a meditation on his fragile life. In 2017, Lewis argued that Van Gogh's art was not just simply describing sufferings but rather exploring mental illness as a state of transformation - a way of actively engaging with his mental differences by sacrificing himself towards the suffering world (p. 2). However, describing Van Gogh's engagement as a "sacrifice" implies a conscious choice, which may overlook the involuntary and destabilizing nature of his psychiatric struggles. Van Gogh's letters revealed a man who was greatly tortured by hallucinations, self-doubt, and isolation, which are experiences that arguably reflect a lack of control rather than deliberate self-sacrifice. Instead, this transformation is more likely a result of the Van Gogh's personal resilience towards the reality of social isolation that cannot be changed. The sower, much like Van Gogh, is engaged in a repetitive, solitary act that bridges despair and hope. Instead of an individual farmer that was painted in *The Sower*, *The Harvest* ^[fig 4] provides a strikingly different perspective on rural labor, the scene portrays multiple workers spread across a massive wheat field, engaged in various stages of harvesting. The fields were elaborately organized, forming geometric patterns that contrast with Van Gogh's usual 'random' compositions. The small and distant figures are swallowed by the sheer scale of the golden landscape, which again emphasized the insignificance of human. Apparently, unlike *The Sower*, which features movement, *The Harvest*



The Harvest ^[fig 4]
 Van Gogh, V. (1888)
 Oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm
 Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

is static, evoking a sense of routine and repetition rather than emotional struggle. It seems that spatial perception can influence emotional experience, noting that large, uninterrupted landscapes can either evoke a sense of freedom or existential, spiritual emptiness. Correspondingly, Françoise (2014) explored Van Gogh's use of interior illustrations to reflect solitude, from Van Gogh's letter to his brother, one can simply sense that *Bedroom in Arles* conveys his personal isolation through its enclosed composition of interior space [p. 35]. Though Françoise did not further discuss *The Harvest*, one could extend this analysis to suggest that Van Gogh's landscape paintings similarly explored solitude, but on a larger, existential scale. It seems that Van Gogh's artistic focus shifted during his time in Arles, where he turned to nature as a source of relief (Bakker, van Tilborgh, & Prins, 2016, p. 61). *The Sower* and *The Harvest*, despite being physically present in the landscape, does not belong to it entirely, reflecting Van Gogh's own feelings of detachment from society despite his admiration for a rural life.

In addition, Van Gogh's inner emotions were expressed through his paintings based on his extraordinary understanding of colors, and *The Night Café* ^[fig 5] (1888) is one of them. The painting illustrates a café interior bathed in abnormal red and green hues, while café is usually a typical space for social interaction, Van Gogh managed to transform it into a setting of loneliness and psychological disturbance. He described the painting in a letter to his brother Theo as a place where “one can ruin oneself, go mad, or commit a crime.” (Van Gogh, Letter 534, 1888) The use of color in *The Night Café* is deliberately acute, the dominant red and high saturation green created a significant yet uncomfortable contrast that ends up breaking traditional harmony. Unlike most paintings, the use of large areas of warm colors did not make people feel warm and comfortable, instead, the depressive mood of the audience is intensified by the blood-red walls, making the space feel suffocating. Therefore, we might be able to make the conclusion that *The Night Café* intend to draw the viewers' attention into a world filled with



The Night Café ^[fig 5]
Van Gogh, V. (1888)
Oil on canvas, 32 × 40.5 cm
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo



Bedroom in Arles ^[fig 6]
Van Gogh, V. (1888)
Oil on canvas, 72 × 90 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

intense emotions and disturbance, providing an immersive emotional journey. It invites the audience to experience the despair of solitude while also offering a path to spiritual relief from the overwhelming forces of human passion (Yuliya et al., 2020, pp. 850 – 851). Yet, the argument did not manage to address how Van Gogh’s posthumous reception shapes modern interpretations. His current stereotype as a tortured genius still influences how audiences project spiritual narratives onto his works. For instance, it is more common for the viewers to sense *The Night Café* as a painting to express his madness over loneliness. However, in *Bedroom in Arles* ^[fig 6] (1888), Van Gogh took a completely different approach to color selection. The painting was one of his most introspective works, picturing his private space in the Yellow House. Van Gogh depicted the space with distorted perspective and unnatural colors, which turned the bedroom from a place of comfort and rest into a narrow and isolated space. He himself described the painting’s color choices as essential to convey his emotions. He wrote to his brother Theo: “... I have painted the walls pale violet. The floor is of red tiles. The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheet and the pillows light lemon green. The blanket scarlet red. The window green. The dressing table orange. The washstand blue. The doors lilac...” (Van Gogh, Letter 705, 1888) These highly saturated, contrasting colors combined with some plain colors were meant to evoke restfulness and simplicity, just as he mentioned in his letter, yet they eventually created a disorienting effect instead. The dominant yellow and red tones add warmth but also create an overwhelming intensity. The strong contrasts between additional colors (blue - orange, red - green, yellow - purple) produced a vibrating tension rather than the calmness he was trying to seek. Yuliya et al. thought that the painting represents Van Gogh’s meticulous attention to his surroundings while simultaneously revealing the vulnerability of his inner world. (2020, p. 847). His pain was buried in his mind, embedded in the very structure of his work, *Bedroom in Arles* is a psychological self-portrait, where color acts not merely as decoration but as a means of psychological expression, it communicates his emotional

solitude and instability.

Van Gogh's brushwork and techniques further reinforce the emotional depth of his paintings, making them not just representations of his solitude but an immersive experience of it. As one of the most iconic paintings in Western art, Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* ^[fig 7] (1889) is renowned for its swirling night sky. The painting is a prime example of how his expressive brushstrokes transform a night scene into a dynamic, psychological landscape. One of the most significant features of the painting is its highly animated brushstrokes. The thick impasto technique results in visible, sculptural brush marks, adding texture and intensity to the surface. The curved brushstrokes filled the sky with swirling moon and stars creating patterns of halo-like rings, and adding circular, concentric lines, offering them an exaggerated luminosity. Unlike traditional night scenes, which emphasize tranquility, the dynamic form of the sky reflects Van Gogh's internal emotion turbulence. His use of texture and techniques serves a psychological function - the thick layers of paint and gestural strokes create a tactile intensity, which makes the viewer able to feel the emotion behind the scene rather than just observing it. Van Gogh managed to blend his internal emotions into the nature, alleviating his painting to a sublimated and profound level. *The Starry Night* was Van Gogh's distress, it was one of his few landscape paintings that did not paint on the spot, but exaggeratedly integrated with various quiet themes to create an aesthetic imagery atmosphere (Dahlan, 2013, p. 336). While the painting undeniably reflects Van Gogh's psychological state during his asylum stay, Dahlan's framing of the work as primarily an expression of "distress" risks overlooking its complexity. The painting's vibrant blues and luminous stars suggest both awe and transcendence, not just anguish. Like Yuliya, Dahlan's interpretation leans into the common stereotype of tragic artist, potentially overshadowing Van Gogh's conscious artistic innovation and his desire to communicate the beauty within his suffering. Furthermore, similar brushstroke can also be found in Van Gogh's *Sunflower* ^[fig 8] series (1889), as the impasto technique created



The Starry Night ^[fig 7]
Van Gogh, V. (1889)
Oil on canvas, 73.7 × 92.1 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, New York



The Sunflower ^[fig 8]
Van Gogh, V. (1889)
Oil on canvas, 95 × 73 cm
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

a sculptural, almost three-dimensional effect. The sunflower petals and stems were painted with heavy, directional strokes, giving the impression of tactile movement, while the flower heads were emphasized via raised texture in order to convey a sense of organic roughness, making the forms feel alive and wilting simultaneously. The background is painted with smoother strokes, contrasting with the thicker paints used on the flowers, drawing the viewer's focus to the center of the paintings. The use of impasto technique was not just a stylistic choice but a reflection of emotional intensity. Van Gogh appeared to be seeking the sense of his own tranquility through painting, yet the bold and heavy brushstrokes, contrasting with the mild content, betrayed himself. Unintentionally, he revealed his inner world, which offers the viewers the chance to glimpse and understand the profound pain and loneliness that he could not conceal. While many scholars interpret Van Gogh's solitude as a symptom of distress, his paintings suggest a more complex relationship between isolation and artistic creation. Lewis (2017) challenges the idea that his works are simply expressions of suffering, instead arguing that Van Gogh actively shaped his emotional experiences through painting (p. 2). This perspective shifts the discussion from the idea of an artist overcome by madness to one who used his medium to explore, process, and even reclaim his solitude. His compositions were carefully structured, his colors deliberately chosen, and his brushstrokes intentionally expressive, suggesting a level of control that contradicts the notion of pure emotional outburst. Van Gogh's ability to engage with solitude through his art requires us to reconsider its role in artistic creation. Rather than viewing his works solely as reflections of despair, they reveal an ongoing dialogue between isolation and self-expression. His paintings provide lasting insight into both personal experience and universal human emotions, challenging the conventional narrative of the "mad genius." Solitude in his art is not merely a burden but a creative force that shaped his vision and continues to resonate beyond his lifetime. Through his mastery of composition, color, and technique, Van Gogh redefined loneliness as both a deeply personal experience and a universally resonant expression

that demonstrated the enduring ability of art to convey and transcend human sufferings.

Conclusion

By analyzing the role played by solitude within Van Gogh's life and art production, this essay reflected the deep connection between social context, mental illness and artistic creation. Due to the insufficient medical treatment for mental illness patients, the 19th century had witnessed the rise and fall of an extraordinary painter. From personal sorrow to human conflict, Vincent Van Gogh had buried his solitude within his art works. People with mental illness were often considered as freaks instead of ones that should be taken good care of both physically and psychologically, hence, confinement and alienation were their destinate fate. Until nowadays, pathological causes are never the major factors that leads to mental illness, it is more likely because their thoughts cannot be understood and resonated by the society, therefore, they are trapped in their own narrow spiritual world. This feeling of being unrecognized is the source of Van Gogh's creativity, but this endless artistic inspiration was never positive, instead, they are the reflection of his failure in saving himself from being trapped in self-doubting. To fully understand Van Gogh and those who suffered from psychological pain, it is a must to move beyond the stereotype of regarding him as merely a tragic artist, but to dig deep into the inner causes of how Van Gogh was shaped by the complex societal context. However, times have changed, only his paintings have remained, and therefore become the channel for us to understand him. Van Gogh's solitude was displayed in his artistic expression, emphasizing the distinctive drawing techniques he used to convey his inner world. Through his bold color choices, expressive brushwork, and compositional structures, he transformed his personal suffering into a form of visual communication that continues to resonate with the audiences until today. Eventually, by looking into Vincent Van Gogh and his paintings, we hope to understand the role of society in shaping an artist's suffering, and it challenges us to

reconsider how societal rejection can either silence or amplify creative voices, and how, in his case, personal solitude became an artistic force that continues to inspire generations, both in the field of art and psychiatry.

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