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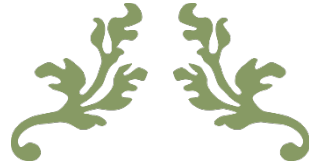
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VAN GOGH, NATURE, AND SPIRITUALITY



APRIL 1, 2021
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Honors in the Major Thesis
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Introduction

Born on March 30th, 1853 in the town of Zundert, The Netherlands, Vincent Willem Van Gogh has become a household name over the centuries since his untimely death in 1890. The Dutch artist is known for his expressive paintings, multitude of letters to friends and family, as well as his mental illness, his self-inflicted ear wound, and eventual suicide. Although he is one of the most renowned artists today, Vincent¹ was barely recognized or appreciated during his lifetime. Throughout his entire career as an artist, he only sold one work of art, his *Red Vineyard*, in 1890. Fast forward to modern day, his paintings can be seen in the most renowned art museums in the world, including his namesake museum, The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, Netherlands. His art is sold at auction for millions of dollars; as seen in the sale of *Irises* for 53.9 million dollars in 1987.² Vincent has become the prototype for the misunderstood, tormented artist. From the single act of his suicide, he came to be known, somewhat misleadingly, as “a manic visionary undone by an intensity and inner drive so volatile that it consumed, so this oversimplified story goes, his sanity itself.”³ However, one aspect of Vincent's career that is often overlooked is his struggle to reconcile his religious upbringing with his desire for a more meaningful spirituality than was possible with his family's dedication to organized religion. From his childhood, Vincent had a complicated relationship with religion, as his father was a Protestant pastor and wanted him to follow in his footsteps. Although Vincent's early attempts to act according to his family's religion resulted in failure, over time he realized he could use the

¹ I will be using Vincent to refer to Vincent Van Gogh, as I mention multiple of his family members throughout this paper who share a last name with Vincent.

² Rita Reif, “Van Gogh's 'Irises' Sells for \$53.9 Million.” (New York Times, 1987)
<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/12/arts/van-gogh-s-irises-sells-for-53.9-million.html>.

³Tim Keane, *Van Gogh's New Religion* (Utne, 2018)

power of nature through his talent as an artist to speak about the “Something on High” or the divine power that looks over the world.⁴ Vincent found comfort and hope in nature, including the wheat fields surrounding him at the end of his life, and the plains of his hometown. Vincent’s love of nature, as well as the embodiment of natural themes through his paintings, was a way for him to transform “the failure of his ministerial vocation into his artistic goal.”⁵

Scholars have suggested that nature became Vincent’s religion, and that he moved away entirely from Christianity during the end of his life. Lauren Soth, art historian, recognizes that *Starry Night* is a religious picture, “a sublimation of impulses that, since Van Gogh’s loss of faith in the Church, could not find their outlet in conventional Christian imagery.”⁶ She focuses on the “amalgam of images” that the painting represents, whether seen from his window or painted from memory.⁷ She discusses the fact that *Starry Night* “was the result of the process of sublimation,” rooting from his need for religion.⁸ I take Soth’s conclusions further, linking the *Wheat Field* series to his need for religion as well. Vincent uses this same process in his other paintings that include religious symbols, but *Starry Night* is the most analyzed in this way, as it is the most famous. Kodera concludes that Vincent “gave up his faith as a Christian and converted to a faith in nature, abandoning Christianity in his later life as a painter.”⁹ He also surmises that other aspects of his work were “attempts to supply a substitute for Christianity and to create a new congregation of believers in naturalized religion.”¹⁰ . Judy Sund draws attention to Vincent’s

⁴ Carol Berry, *Vincent Van Gogh: His Spiritual Vision in Life and Art*, (Maryknoll; Orbis Books, 2003)

⁵ Yongnam Park, *Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith and how it Influenced his Life and Art* (Dublin; Dublin City University, 2017) 17

⁶ Lauren Soth, “Van Gogh’s Agony.” *The Art Bulletin* , vol. 68, no. 2, 1986, pp. 301–313., doi:CAA. 304

⁷ Soth, “Van Gogh’s Agony,” 306

⁸ Soth, “Van Gogh’s Agony” 308

⁹ Park, *Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith*, 16

¹⁰ Park, *Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith*, 17

admiration for the Bible, specifically the parables. She concludes that Vincent “aimed to communicate meaning within similarly mundane contexts” within his work.¹¹ Sund recognizes the importance of Christianity in Vincent’s work, but I argue further that spirituality goes hand in hand with his subject matter and vision.

While these scholar’s conclusions are sound, through this thesis I will argue instead that Vincent Van Gogh never fully strayed from Christianity, rather he used his art as a way of preaching his religious beliefs, after his failure of being a minister of the written word. His religious upbringing as a Groningen Protestant influenced his opinions on his own life, and the lives of those around him, from which he never fully strayed. Although Vincent may not have directly made the connection between his art and the idea of visual preaching, we as scholars can hypothesize this conclusion because of his extensive references to religious symbols, the importance of religion in his own life, and the way he chooses to express himself through his art.

In what follows, I attempt to show how Vincent instead turned to nature as a tool for him to both understand religion and portray it through his paintings. Finding commonalities between a version of Calvinism that saw God’s hand in the smallest piece of the natural world and secular inspiration such as Transcendentalism, Vincent expressed his beliefs in his paintings of nature, in particular the *Wheat Field* series of paintings and his pictures featuring cypress trees created toward the end of his life. While distancing himself from the traditional ministry of Christianity, Van Gogh used depictions of nature in his art to satisfy his need for spirituality at the end of his life. Vincent found religious success in using his art as a form of preaching, creating sermons full of religious symbols through each of his paintings. Through the selection of paintings with explicit references to Christianity, as well as the concrete symbols of wheat fields, cypress trees,

¹¹ Judy Sund, “The Sower and the Sheaf: Biblical Metaphor in the Art of Vincent van Gogh.” *The Art Bulletin* 70 (4):1988)

and sowers, I will explore Vincent's journey as a visual preacher. This thesis will contribute to scholarship on Vincent by furthering connections between his religious beliefs, specifically his family's Dutch form of Calvinism, and his art, helping to complete the picture of Vincent Van Gogh as an artist.

Chapter 1- Religion and Family

Vincent grew up in a sternly religious family and atmosphere, despite his family's moderate Calvinist views. Vincent's father, Theodorus Van Gogh, belonged to the Groningen School, "a nineteenth-century Dutch theological tendency that wanted nothing to do with the old orthodox Reformed straitjacket."¹² The difference between the Groningen School, the liberal branch of the Dutch Reformed Church, and strict Calvinism, is explained by philosopher Paul Tillich as "the one was a critical opinion and the other was the dissolution of Calvinist orthodoxy which has grounded traditional protestant theology in nineteenth-century Holland. There, however, was no theological solution in Holland."¹³ The Van Gogh's preached the sect of Calvinism that relayed these Groningen ideals, which were more humanistic and mystical than Calvinism's original beliefs. This religious system is based on the belief that "Calvinism as a belief system is imposed by foreigners on the Dutch people which 'disrupted and disturbed the natural, genuinely Netherlandish development of the Christian spirit here.'¹⁴ The Groningen school was led by Petrus Hofstede de Groot of Groningen University and was strongly influenced by the writings of Thomas a Kempis, and Erasmus, a German author and Dutch philosopher, respectively. ¹⁵ The school was opposed by conservative orthodox Protestants associated with the anti-modern Reveille movement, who found their beliefs and traditions too modernist. In the 1860s, there was a split within the Dutch Reformed Church, with the forming of the Association of Netherlands Reformed Ministers, and the establishment of the Confessional

¹² Leo Janson, "Vincent van Gogh: The Letters." Van Gogh Letters. Van Gogh Museum.
<http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters.html>

¹³ Park, *Vincent Van Gogh's Christian Faith*, 18

¹⁴ Benjamin Kaplan, *Reformation and the Practice of Toleration* (Leiden: Brill, 2019) 215

¹⁵ Will Atkinson, "The Sociogenesis of Vincent van Gogh's Fundamental Artistic Disposition," (Bristol; University of Bristol, 2020)

Association, tasked with “driving out modernizers.”¹⁶ The Groningen School was effectively superseded, and the clergy shrank in size. At the time of the Van Gogh family’s involvement with the movement, the modernist ideals were not as spread out through the Netherlands as they had been decades before. The Van Gogh family had been involved with the Groningen School going back to Vincent’s grandfather. He “occupied a dominated position” in the school and held a leadership position in the Society for Prosperity, which had been formed to address the “issue with the accommodationist stance on Catholics.”¹⁷ Because of the dispersal of the Groningen School later on, the Van Gogh name had “become somewhat stigmatized,” preventing Vincent’s father from securing positions in the more urban parishes that had rejected the Groningen ideals of nature and agricultural importance.¹⁸

One of Calvinists’ basic concepts is order, and the importance of organized religion. Followers of Calvinism placed emphasis on being “called as chosen soldiers of God.”¹⁹ In pure Calvinism, art for the sake of religious worship was severely frowned upon. John Calvin is very clear in his thoughts on where God can be found: the written word is where one can find God, and to use anything else, such as art, takes one away from the word of God. In the Catechumen, as quoted in Weber, Calvin writes, “it does forbid these two things; that we make images either for representing God or worshipping him.”²⁰ One notion against the use of art in worship was that viewers could “become so transfixed by the beauty of the images they were using that they forgot to look beyond them to God.”²¹ The religious practice of the Van Gogh’s was much more

¹⁶ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis”

¹⁷ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis,”

¹⁸ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis,”

¹⁹ Benjamin Kaplan, *Reformation and the Practice of Toleration* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)

²⁰ Christopher Richard Joby, “Calvinism and the Arts: A Re-assessment.” (Durham Thesis, Durham University, 2005) page 5

²¹ Joby, “Calvinism and the Arts” page 7

accepting of art than original Calvinism, which could have propelled Vincent to explore art after failing at having a religious profession. His mother, Anna Carbentus Van Gogh, came from an artistic background herself, giving her children that same outlet. Her father had been a bookbinder to the Dutch royal family, and Anna herself was known to fill books with drawings and paintings of botanical themes.²² Nature was heavily instilled in their daily lives, as “The Van Gogh family went on frequent walks in the area around Zundert, helping to instill a great love of nature in the future artist.”²³ Anna insisted on daily walks through Zundert to raise the spirits of the family, as well as “stamping the family unit with imprimatur of glorious Nature.”²⁴ There were said to be “three intertwined pillars to the family spirit” during the time of Vincent’s youth; religion, art, and nature.²⁵ Both Dorus and Anna loved nature, and “set out to find its vistas because they embraced the mystical union of nature and religion,” that had been popularized by the Dutch church. The belief at that time was that beauty in nature sounded the “higher tones” of the eternal, and that appreciating nature’s beauty qualified as ‘worship’.²⁶ Vincent’s mother grew a garden outside their house, which was very common for Dutch families to do in the late 19th century. Anna took this opportunity to teach her children the symbolism of nature through her garden. She taught them that “the cycle of life could be marked out in the blooming and fading of certain plants,” and “hope could rise from despair ‘even as the blossom falls from the tree and vigorous new life shoots up.’”²⁷ Through the art of Vincent’s later life, viewers can see inspirations from these lessons within his themes of natural laws.

“The revolving seasons, the rising and setting of the sun and moon, even the perpetual tasks of nature’s ally, the farmer, in his rounds from plowing, to planting, to harvest, and

²² Jan Greenburg, *Van Gogh, Portrait of an Artist* (Random House, 2001) 6

²³ “Young Vincent,” Van Gogh Museum, March 29th, 2021

²⁴ Steven Naifeh, *Van Gogh: The Life* (Random House, 2012) 26

²⁵ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis,”

²⁶ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis,”

²⁷ Naifeh, *Van Gogh*, 27

the laying in of food- until seeding could commence again- all these recurring cycles gave reassuring order and meaning to the artist's life."²⁸

It was from his mother's lessons that Vincent came to his own conclusion that "trees, especially tree roots, affirmed the promise of life after death."²⁹ Steven W. Naifeh, author of *Van Gogh: The Life*, goes further to hypothesize that "all the lessons in symbolism that Vincent eventually transformed into paint from Christian mythology, from art and literature- all first took root in his mother's garden."³⁰

From the beginning of his life, Vincent struggled with identity and self-confidence. "My youth was gloomy, cold and sterile," he writes.³¹ He was the black sheep of the family, which was reinforced by the fact that he was named after his deceased brother who had passed exactly one year before the birth of Vincent. In a condolence letter written to family friend Hermanus Gijsbertus Tersteeg in 1877 about the death of his infant daughter, Vincent mentions his discovery of his deceased brother. "My father has also felt what you will have been feeling these past days," Vincent wrote to Tersteeg,

"I recently stood early one morning in the cemetery in Zundert next to the little grave on which is written: Suffer the little children to come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of God. More than 25 years have passed since he buried his first little boy there."³²

His sense that he was a poor substitute for the brother he had never known further contributed to his "gloomy, cold and sterile" childhood. Vincent had much more modern beliefs than his father Theodorus, which furthered the strain in their relationship. Although completely different, Vincent did end up following the same path as his father, as he became a preacher through his

²⁸ Uitert, *Van Gogh Drawings*, 189

²⁹ Naifeh, *Van Gogh*, 27

³⁰ Naifeh, *Van Gogh*

³¹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, November 5th, 1883

³² Vincent Van Gogh to Hermanus Gijsbertus Tersteeg, August 3rd, 1877

art. He consciously distanced himself from organized religion but ended up finding his own way of expressing Christian values and interests. He mirrored his father's life through his art, although this was the last thing he wanted to do intentionally. No matter how much he wanted to distance from him, Vincent did emulate his father even in a way he did not approve of.

Vincent was constantly surrounded by the basic principles of Calvinism, the most characteristic of these being the idea of "predestination."³³ In summary, you are either chosen by God, or you are not. Max Weber notes that in Chapter Three of *God's Eternal Decree*, it is written that "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death."³⁴ If a person is not chosen for everlasting life, God can "withdraweth the gifts which they had and exposeth them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin: and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan."³⁵ If Vincent felt as if he was not chosen by God for everlasting life, he would have felt a stronger gravitation towards corruption, as that would have been his only option. His string of professional failures, lack of strong personal relationships, and overall mental state expedited his "giving over to his own lists, the temptations of the world, and power of Satan." The doctrine of Calvinism, in its nature, must have had consequences on the lives of people who received it. "In its extreme inhumanity," Calvinism brought upon a feeling of "unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual."³⁶ Nobody could "help him" on his path through life, and the most important thing in life is one's "eternal salvation." Man is "forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been

³³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1940) 98

³⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 100

³⁵ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 101

³⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 104

decreed for him from eternity.”³⁷ This loneliness and helplessness most likely affected Vincent greatly throughout his life, made more prominent by his family’s success within their professions and religion. A well-known ideal in the Calvinist Doctrine is that “God requires social achievement of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose.” Vincent had little to no social achievements, with his life strewn with unfortunate encounters, judgement from his peers and neighbors, and failures on all fronts of his life.³⁸ Would his life be worth it even if he is not saved? This must have been a question he grappled with through his entire lifetime, specifically his early adulthood.

Because of the influence of his father and his consistent exposure to religion, Vincent felt as though his calling was to preach the gospels. There were no other options for a career according to his family, and this was the one path Vincent felt would bring him closer to being saved. However, this goal never came to fruition, which furthered his confusion of identity. The Van Gogh family had high expectations of him, as his brother Theo was a successful art dealer, three of his five uncles were art gallery owners, and his father was the town’s most renowned pastor.

³⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 104

³⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 108

Chapter 2: The Beginnings of Life as an Artist

To become a priest in the Dutch Reformed Church, one of the requirements is to study theology for six years. Vincent attempted this in Amsterdam but gave up after failing the entrance examination. After abandoning his plans as a student of the classics and religious studies in Amsterdam, 1877, Vincent was still eager to please his father and continue to serve God. In an attempt to appease his father and find a purpose for his religious experience, Vincent spent ten months in 1879 as an evangelist in the coal mining district in southern Belgium, a region called the Borinage, as a prelude to his life as a pastor. During this time, he “taught, visited the sick, and gave bible readings.”³⁹ It was in Belgium where Vincent was drawn to art, as he felt it important to depict the lives of the people around him. He felt deep emotions and found connections with the people who had laborious jobs, and saw them as honest, hardworking people. Calvinists live their lives through hard work and dedication, to prove to God that they are worthy to be saved, which resonates with the work ethic of the miners. “God does not exist for men, but men for the sake of God,” states the Calvinist doctrine.⁴⁰ The common Calvinist character shares a calling by “labor which serves the mundane life of a community.”⁴¹ Protestantism in the late 19th century found immense popularity in the Netherlands, highly due to the shared value and emphasis on the importance of labor, and a life full of hard work. The Dutch have always been hard workers, which is displayed through their artistic priorities and cultural values. A life full of good deeds is “demanded of the God of Calvinism, but not just a single good work, but a life of good works combined into a unified system.”⁴² In a letter to Theo

³⁹ “The Christ of the Coal Mine,” Van Gogh Museum, March 29th, 2021

⁴⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 102

⁴¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 111

⁴² Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 117

in 1879, Vincent discussed his interest of the miners and their dedication to labor in his sketches “If anyone were to try and make a painting of the *maintenages* [working spaces], that would be something new and something unheard-of or rather never-before-seen.”⁴³ He wrote to Theo,

“Not long ago I made a very interesting expedition, spending six hours in a mine. It was Marcasse, one of the oldest and most dangerous mines in the neighbourhood. It has a bad reputation because many perish in it, either going down or coming up, or through poisoned air, firedamp explosion, water seepage, cave-ins, etc. It is a gloomy spot, and at first everything around looks dreary and desolate.”⁴⁴

As it so happened, Vincent himself became the person to depict the working spaces of miners and their wives in multiple compositions. In *Coal Mine in the Borinage, 1879*, (Figure 1), Vincent depicts the landscape surrounding the village, with a sole figure depicted on the left-hand side. The color scheme is one of earth tones and muted colors, emphasizing the simplicity of the lifestyle and atmosphere. In his paintings during his time at the Borinage, Vincent used a muted color palette to

emphasize that “the coal-miner scarcely enjoys the sun’s rays except on Sunday.” He talks of the light of their lamps as being a “pale and feeble” illumination, which is mirrored in the muted tones of the paintings. He finds inspiration with these men, as they



Figure 1- Vincent Van Gogh, *Coal Mine in the Borinage*, 1879, watercolor on paper, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

“entrust themselves to their God, who sees their labors and who protects him, his wife and his

⁴³ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, April 1879

⁴⁴ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, April 1879

children.” Coal-mining is an honest sense of work that coincides with the Calvinist value of physical labor and hard work. This realist cityscape is stylistically different from what he is known for, but in this watercolor painting Vincent depicts a realistic view of what he saw every day.

“It’s a somber place, and at first sight everything around it has something dismal and deathly about it. The workers there are usually people, emaciated and pale owing to fever, who look exhausted and haggard, weather-beaten and prematurely old, the women generally sallow and withered”

said Van Gogh to Theo in a letter observing his surroundings.⁴⁵ Viewers can see his observations of the workers through the color choice, using a sickly palette of greens and yellows. The earth tones also connect the workers to the earth itself, showing their deeply rooted dedication to physical labor and the mines they worked in.

Vincent preached that “we should think of Christ as a workman with lines of sorrow and fatigue on his face.”⁴⁶ “Who could better understand the life of a workman and laborer whose life is hard, than the son of a man who labored for thirty years in a humble carpenter’s shop to fulfill God’s will?” he asked his congregation.⁴⁷ Van Gogh lived among the miners in the village, giving his possessions away and sharing the villagers' poverty. Van Gogh wanted to imitate the early Christians during this period of missionary work, giving his clothes away to the miners and rarely bathing. To attain the self-confidence that is necessary to know your status as a chosen one of God, Calvinists must accomplish “intense worldly activity,” of which *Unio Mystico* is a common means.⁴⁸ The term, meaning “the feeling of actual absorption in the deity, that of a real entrance of the divine into the soul of the believer” was implemented by Vincent during his time

⁴⁵ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, April 1879

⁴⁶ Naifeh, Van Gogh, 195

⁴⁷ Naifeh, Van Gogh

⁴⁸ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 112

in Belgium. Vincent's way of absorbing God was to act how he felt Jesus would act in the Borinage. He mirrored Jesus by serving the miners as Jesus would. This was how he tried to attain self-confidence; however he was shut down, resulting in feelings of "imperfect grace."⁴⁹ A lack of self-confidence in Calvinism is "the result of insufficient faith," which would have distressed Vincent and furthered his sense of abnormality.⁵⁰ His dedication to this task of *Unio Mystico* was so strong that he was nicknamed "The Christ of the Coal Mine," as he lived like them and cared for them as Jesus would have.⁵¹ Van Gogh viewed life as a "trinity wherein physical labor, art-making and transformations in nature's daily rhythms unfold in synchronicity," and his time in Belgium gave him time and opportunities to see this harmony. However, the radical life changes he made during his time with the coal miners were seen as inappropriate, and church officials withdrew their support, more or less ending Vincent's experience. They saw his behavior as "an inexcusable breach of ministerial dignity, 'conduct unbecoming of a Minister of the Gospel.'"⁵² This was perceived by his family as yet another failure, which led Vincent to cease all communication with them for a year, also known as his "silent period". During this time, he faced his first deep identity crisis. At this point in his adulthood, Vincent

"was wrestling, at base, with who he was; he was struggling to understand the dissonant elements of himself, the religious man and the artist, and the ways they might combine. He was frightened of the spiritual void he might confront if he gave up his religious life, yet he had known no other life."⁵³

⁴⁹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 112

⁵⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 111

⁵¹ "The Christ of the Coal Mine," Van Gogh Museum, March 29th, 2021

⁵² Kenneth Vaux, *The Ministry of Vincent Van Gogh in Religion and Art* (Wipf and Stock: 2012) page 15

⁵³ Nellie Hermann, *Idle Bird* (Paris Review: 2015)

According to Calvinism, the meaning of “our individual destiny is hidden in dark mystery which it would be impossible to pierce and presumptuous to question.”⁵⁴ Even after all of his failures in the church, Vincent’s destiny would have been shrouded in a dark mystery that he could not question.

From the beginning of Vincent’s life, he believed in the “Something on High,” and references this phrase in multiple letters to his brother Theo.⁵⁵ This divine idea was at the core of all he believed and accomplished, but he always struggled to find ways to learn more. Growing up as a moderate Calvinist, he was taught to believe that every little thing, even a blade of grass, had meaning. Walt Whitman, whose poetry Vincent greatly admired, expressed a similar view in his “Song of Myself” in which he writes “a blade of grass is the journeywork of the stars.”⁵⁶ Part of the “Alchemy” of Van Gogh’s painting style was his ability to make “the mundane fantastic while unearthing the sublime from the seemingly unremarkable.”⁵⁷

An example of finding beauty in the mundane is found in the 1890 painting *Two Diggers Among Trees* (Figure 2). Vincent combines the beauty of nature and physical labor to shine light on the importance of the two ideas. The blue overalls of the two men share the same colors as the mountains in the background, seamlessly connecting the figures and the landscape. The figures are relatively minute, appearing “like small stones or slates protruding from the earth, two colorful earthen forms among others.”⁵⁸ Vincent takes the action of human labor, “semi-wild nature and the act of painting” to create a single spectacle of “representation, lyricism, and

⁵⁴ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 103

⁵⁵ Carol Berry, *Vincent Van Gogh*

⁵⁶ Hulsker, Jane. 1988. “Whitman and Van Gogh: An Exchange.” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5 (3): 22-24.

⁵⁷ Keane, *Van Gogh’s New Religion*

⁵⁸ Keane, *Van Gogh’s New Religion*

abstraction.”⁵⁹ It is important to note that in the doctrine of Calvinism, landscape paintings were one of the only forms of art that were deemed acceptable. Vincent’s combination of a landscape portrayal as well as the rendering of physical labor, a trait Calvinist’s loved, combines sought after ideals to create a subject appropriate to his religious beliefs.

As an artist, Vincent had a colossal foundation of landscape paintings from the Dutch oeuvre to learn from. The 17th century gave the world a new avidity for landscape paintings because of the raging popularity of the genre in Northern Europe. Artists such as Philip Konick, Paulus Potter, and Aelbert Cuyp created compositions of “pure landscapes, devoid of moralizing narratives.”⁶⁰ The Netherlands was a relatively new country at the turn of the 17th century, and its “prosperity enabled it to undertake massive land reclamation projects.”⁶¹ Because of these advancements, the physical land became a symbol of the growth of the country. Ann Jensen Adams goes further to conclude that Dutch landscape paintings of the 17th century “appeal to the conjunction of the political, economic, and religious shifts that together convulsed seventeenth-century Holland,” and that these factors



Figure 2- Vincent Van Gogh, *Two Diggers Among Trees*, 1889, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan.

⁵⁹Keane, Van Gogh’s New Religion

⁶⁰ Altoon Sultan, “Culture/Cultivation: Thoughts on Painting the Landscape.” (*Art Journal*, vol. 57, no. 4, 1998) 93

⁶¹ Sultan, “Culture/Cultivation,” 92

“gave new meaning to the local, the prosaic, and recognizable features of land, for dramatic changes took place in these three spheres simultaneously.”⁶²

For our purposes, the sphere of religion is the most relevant lens through which to analyze these paintings. The Dutch Reformation brought the emergence of the Protestant church, creating a religious transformation in the Netherlands. Churches are often depicted in landscape paintings, often paired with symbols of economic prosperity such as cattle or agriculture.⁶³ A question is then proposed of whether this is to associate “Dutch prosperity with the Dutch Reformed Church for some viewers” or if it is to reference a time of the past, where Catholicism brought great prosperity to the country.⁶⁴ The connection between religion and prosperity can be seen within Albert Cuyp’s *View of Dordrecht with Cattle (The “Large Dort”)* from the late 1640s. Because of the extreme fragmentation of the Dutch culture because of political and religious contention, the landscape paintings of Dutch artists “offer a communal identity on several levels, legitimizing their themes through naturalizing and historicizing them, offering security where none in fact was to be had.”⁶⁵ The importance of agriculture, churches, farm animals, and peasants at work within Dutch Reformation era paintings gives Vincent a stronger connection to these ideals, which he connects to his own religious views later in his life.

Vincent’s paintings of nature were never just decorative compositions; they always focused on another aspect of life besides solely the beauty of nature, for example labor, religion, or human life. In his first letter written to Theo after his eleven-month silent period, Vincent

⁶² Ann Jenson Adams, “Competing Communities in the ‘Great Bog of Europe.’” (*Landscape and Power*, University of Chicago Press, 1994,) 38

⁶³ Adams, “Competing Communities” 60

⁶⁴ Adams, “Competing Communities” 61

⁶⁵ Adams, “Competing Communities” 68

equates the great artists of the time to the writers of the Gospel, equating them as though “there is something of Rembrandt in the Gospel, or something of the Gospel in Rembrandt.”⁶⁶ He equates the love of the Bible to the love of art, calling them both sacred. In his eyes, “To try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote or told it in a book; another, in a picture.”⁶⁷ This letter describes his mental shift from the desire to be a minister of word, to becoming a minister of art.

⁶⁶ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, June 24th, 1880

⁶⁷ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, June 24th, 1880

Chapter 3: Turning Towards Nature

Vincent connected many natural objects to his faith, including the stars as a symbol of faith itself, wheat as hope, and the sower as someone spreading the word of God. After his failed attempt at becoming a preacher, Vincent found connection with religion in drawing peasants, and scenes of daily life, inspired by the French impressionists. After his time in Belgium, Vincent briefly moved to Paris in 1886, where he was exposed to the Impressionist style, which was becoming quickly popular in the city. Through his early stage in becoming an artist, he began to “recognize his soul’s desire to create an art where there will be God in it.”⁶⁸ He eventually discovered that his way of being a missionary through Christ was to share his feelings and faith through art.⁶⁹ Besides sketching for his own purposes, Vincent also often included sketches in the letters he sent to Theo, of both his surroundings and original artworks. In a letter written to



Figure 3- Vincent Van Gogh, *Sketch to Theo*, 1880, pencil on paper

Theo in early 1880, after his time in Belgium, he mentions the importance of his drawings, saying “It’s because I think you’d prefer to see me doing something good than doing nothing at all that I’m writing to you on this subject.”⁷⁰ In this

letter, Vincent attaches a sketch of miners “male and female thrutchers, going to the pit in the morning, in the snow (Figure 3).”⁷¹ This early drawing in his artistic career shows his interest in

⁶⁸Carol Berry, *Vincent Van Gogh (New York: Orbis)* 56

⁶⁹ Carol Berry, *Vincent Van Gogh*, 69

⁷⁰ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, August 20th, 1880

⁷¹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, August 20th, 1880

figure studies, as well as the everyday lives of the working class. After the failure in Belgium, Theo advised Vincent to concentrate more on his art, which helped convince Vincent that “he could also serve God as an artist.”⁷² Creating art is how he connected to the “Something on High.” According to Carol Berry, “his artistic and life’s purpose would be to unite with the soul of the other.”⁷³

Many of Vincent’s ideas about religion and nature align with the Transcendentalist movement in America, also known as “a Puritan form of Romanticism.”⁷⁴ Finding popularity in America in the 19th century, this movement appealed to Americans who began looking for a “philosophy which would be more cheerful than Calvinism, more inspiring than a philosophy of mere bourgeois common-sense, and also a doctrine of life which would be directly accessible.”⁷⁵

In a letter to his sister, Vincent mentions the work of Whitman,

“Have you read Whitman’s American poems yet? Theo should have them, and I really urge you to read them, first because they’re really beautiful, and also, English people are talking about them a lot at the moment. He sees in the future, and even in the present, a world of health, of generous, frank carnal love -of friendship -of work, with the great starry firmament, something, in short, that one could only call God and eternity, put back in place above this world. They make you smile at first, they’re so *candid*, and then they make you think, for the same reason.”⁷⁶

The basis of transcendentalism is a combination of respecting nature and self-sufficiency, with elements taken from German Romanticism and Utilitarianism. At its core, the Transcendentalists “believed in the importance of a direct relationship with God and with nature.”⁷⁷ The movement embraced nature and opposed materialism, beliefs that Vincent had tried to embrace during his

⁷² “First Steps as an Artist,” Van Gogh Museum, March 29th, 2021

⁷³ Carol Berry, *Vincent Van Gogh*, 76

⁷⁴ Albert Schinz, “French Origins of American Transcendentalism” (*American Journal of Psychology*, 1918)

⁷⁵ Schinz, “French Origins”

⁷⁶ Vincent Van Gogh to Wilimien Van Gogh, August 26th, 1888

⁷⁷ Schinz, “French Origins”

time with the coal miners in Belgium. By the early 1880s, Vincent had “turned to nature as his sole source of spiritual fulfillment.”⁷⁸ This natural spirituality explains why “he rarely painted religious themes, but focused instead on landscapes and portraits of simple people who lived in harmony with nature.”⁷⁹ Vincent used art as a language, and “found a new way of seeing” that did not already have a language.⁸⁰ He had a specific vision of humanity, “and by extension art itself,” becoming one with nature, and as a result transforming society’s consciousness that “would cure Western society of its diseased soul,” a soul which Vincent found was “cannibalizing itself through pettiness, egocentricity, and greed.”⁸¹ Many of Vincent’s most popular paintings are from the end of his life, when he moved to Southern France in search of a new light and atmosphere. Vincent had a strong desire to leave Paris, to “lose the morbid trappings of the city—the cloudy weather, the competitiveness among painter peers, the monetary rat race, and, most decidedly, the relative absence of sunlight and natural forms.”⁸² To him, “Paris made the earth invisible to the artist and the earth was, in a word, his sole subject and muse.”⁸³

Attracted to the saturated light and warmth of Provence, Vincent had dreams of opening a Studio of the South; a place where artists could live and create together. He invited Paul Gauguin, fellow artist, to join him “in this kingdom of light.”⁸⁴ The collaboration between the two artists was brief and ended in a violent fight between the two. Vincent’s dream of his studio was quickly shattered after his friendship with Paul Gauguin ended, resulting in the famous ear

⁷⁸ Ann Murray, “The Religious Background of Vincent Van Gogh and its Relation to his Views on Nature and Art (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume XLVI, Issue 1, March 1978)

⁷⁹ Murray, “The Religious Background,” Page 66

⁸⁰ Maura Coughlin, *Van Gogh and Nature* (Clark Art Institute, 2015)

⁸¹ Keane, *Van Gogh’s New Religion*

⁸² Keane, *Van Gogh’s New Religion*

⁸³ Keane, *Van Gogh’s New Religion*

⁸⁴ CDC, “Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). The Prison Courtyard (1890)

incident. This incident involved Vincent cutting off a portion of his left ear during a hallucinogenic episode and presenting it to a prostitute in Arles.⁸⁵ This period in Vincent's life brought a decline in mental health, and he eventually admitted himself into the Saint Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in Saint-Remy-de-Provence in May of 1889. Within a week of entering the asylum, Vincent began work on *Iris*, as seen below (Figure 4). There is a liveliness found in



Figure 4- Vincent Van Gogh, *Iris*, 1889, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum

this painting that differs from his later works at the end of his life. There are clear outlines without harshness, and the flowers are painted with much lighter brushstrokes than some of his other flower paintings, such as the *Sunflower* series. The painting is full of life and light, which contrasts with his

mental health at the time of its completion. *Iris* shows Van Gogh's deep admiration for nature by creating such a detailed composition of such a small aspect of life. His interest in depicting nature went further than just the rendering of the forms, but his "sustained interest in observing and giving form to the movement of trees, the patterns of plants, and the vibrations of one form against another demonstrates a prescient understanding of the interconnectedness of matter and the importance of biological diversity that is at the heart of much ecological criticism in the humanities today." This emphasis in his paintings parallels his appreciation for every natural

⁸⁵ "South of France," Van Gogh Museum, March 29th, 2021

thing, no matter the size or form. Vincent constantly saw the little things in life as a miracle, “the kind of miracle by which a grain of wheat becomes an ear,” and transferred these miracles into his paintings.⁸⁶ Something so simple as the harvesting of wheat inspired him, even when his life was full of hardships and mental health troubles.

⁸⁶ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, April 1st, 1883

Chapter 4- Wheat Fields

Vincent's letters to Theo serve as a primary source for his references to religion, more specifically, the symbol of wheat. His letters were his main method of correspondence with his brother Theo, whom he became very close to in his early adult life. Vincent believed that we can "learn patience from seeing the wheat slowly come up, the growing of things."⁸⁷ One can learn many lessons from wheat, including patience and growth, which is perhaps why he chose to paint them so often. He perhaps even saw himself in the wheat, as he was "slow to grow." He makes the parallel between the growth of wheat and the growth of human beings. Because of his appreciation for the growth of wheat, this gives him a chance to be patient with himself. He writes to Theo, "should one think oneself such a hugely dead thing that one believed one wouldn't grow? Should one deliberately discourage one's development? I say this to show *why* I find it so silly to talk about gifts and no gifts."⁸⁸ Further, when Vincent feels stuck or is struggling, he writes that he looks at the wheat fields for inspiration and peace. "Their story is ours," he says, going further to equate men to wheat itself. His repetitions of the subject become a reflection of the times in his later life, in which he spiraled and "thought of all the things whose reason he did not understand."⁸⁹ His connection to wheat also reaches back to his Calvinist roots. He writes that "at least ought we not submit to growing, powerless to move, like a plant, relative to what our imagination sometimes desires, and to be reaped when we are ripe, as it is?"⁹⁰ The idea of being "powerless to move" equates to the idea that all humans are predestined to be saved or not, and they do not have the power to change this fact. The importance of the Dutch work

⁸⁷ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, October 28th, 1883

⁸⁸ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, October 28th, 1883

⁸⁹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, October 28th, 1883

⁹⁰ Vincent Van Gogh to Wilimien Van Gogh, July 2nd, 1889

ethic is shown through Vincent's subject matter, as well as the emphasis on the figures engaging with the cycles of life. The existence of laborers within the composition gives a sense of equality between the peasants, who are deemed insignificant by society, and the landscape they are physically working with. The idea of labor is twofold within this painting; the figure is working with the wheat, harvesting it through the action of reaping the fields. On the other hand, wheat itself is considered a working plant, as it then becomes grain which later becomes bread, feeding those who reap it. Wheat as a symbol can mean a myriad of things, but in the case of Vincent I will make the connection with religion because of his many references in his letters, his continued interest in the symbol in connection to peasant laborers, and his constant need for spiritual satisfaction.

In his own words, Vincent ties together humanity with fields of wheat. He writes to Theo, "I feel so strongly that the story of people is like the story of wheat, if one isn't sown in the earth to germinate there, what does it matter, one is milled in order to become bread."⁹¹ Wheat at its basis is a product that is worked by humans, turned into a manufactured good and consumed by the mass population. Wheat has fed humanity since the beginning of time, making it a staple in the diets of almost the entire world. Going further into the symbolism, the bread created by wheat stands for the Body of Christ, which is served in the Eucharist as Communion in the Catholic Church. Because of this ancient ritual, wheat serves as a symbol in Christianity on multiple levels. Through his use of wheat, scholars and viewers can understand how he uses his paintings as vessels for his beliefs, giving a spiritual message to each work of art he creates.

⁹¹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 20th, 1889

Arguably his most famous painting, *Starry Night*, 1889, was painted at the beginning of his voluntary stay at the mental hospital in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence (Figure 5). He painted this nocturnal scene from his window in the asylum in the summer of 1889, after sketching the composition in scenes of both daylight and night. This composition is an almost parallel to the daytime composition of his later painting, *Wheat Field with Cypresses*. This painting is full of symbols that art historians have linked to religious themes from Christianity. Vincent



Figure 5- Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, MoMA

himself mentions many themes from the painting in his letters to Theo, relaying that “hope is in the stars.”⁹² This hope he speaks of could be related to his hope for success, for meaning, or for a place in the world he lived in, which he had not found yet through Calvinism. In early June of that same year, Vincent wrote to Theo, “This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big.”⁹³ Astronomers and scholars have been able to confirm that Venus was visible at dawn in Southern France in the spring of 1889, so it is very possible that the brightest “star” in *Starry Night* is in fact, Venus.⁹⁴ Although his relationship to religion was complicated at this point in his life, and he had ceased to portray outright religious themes within his paintings, he never fully rejected his

⁹² Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 20th, 1889

⁹³ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, June 1889

⁹⁴ Albert Boime, “Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*: A History of Matter and A Matter of History,” 1984

beliefs. He wrote this in a letter to Theo after completing *Starry Night Over the Rhône*, ‘confessing to a’ “tremendous need for, shall I say the word -for religion- so I go outside at night to paint the stars.”⁹⁵ The sky in *Starry Night* is “expressed with the imagery of the kingdom of God or heaven which is the final goal as a pilgrim and symbolizes God and eternity.”⁹⁶ He had already had this symbolism in mind before the painting was completed, as he wrote about “a starry night, the figure of Christ in blue, all the strongest blues, and the angel broken lemon yellow.”⁹⁷ His rendering of darkness versus light does not simply mean the balance between good and evil, but instead it symbolizes “dark night of the soul as described by John of the Cross, a spiritual crisis in the journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God.”⁹⁸ This further reinforces the idea that each of his paintings include a subtle message about Christianity, whether it be through the most simple form, or a complex theme. The architecture of the church in the background is most likely a reference to his origins in the Netherlands, as the church in St. Rémy, St. Martin was domed, whereas the church in *Starry Night* has a steeply pitched roof. With its tall spire, “it is a type of church rare in Provence but common in the northland especially common in Brabant, Van Gogh’s homeland.”⁹⁹

One of the most obvious religious themes in this painting is the addition of a large cypress tree, taking up a large portion of the composition. Cypress trees hold much symbolic weight, due to their height and durability. The mythological origins of the tree come from the Greek poet Ovid, who tells a story of a boy named Cyparissus, who accidentally kills Apollo’s favorite stag. As a consequence of his actions, Apollo turned him into a cypress tree, after the

⁹⁵ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 29th, 1889

⁹⁶ Park, Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith, 66

⁹⁷ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 21st, 1889

⁹⁸ Park, Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith, 66

⁹⁹ Soth, *Van Gogh’s Agony*

boy begged the gods to “let his grief endure forever.”¹⁰⁰ Through this story, the tree became a symbol of the immortal soul. Because of their distinct shape pointing to the sky, they are seen as symbols associated with the heavens, such as hope and faith. They are also one of the oldest signs of mourning, referred to by the ancient Greeks and Romans as the “mournful tree.” In Greek and Roman mythology, cypress trees are the symbols of the gods of the netherworld, specifically the Fates and Furies.¹⁰¹ Because of this, cypress trees are often planted near burial sites and cemeteries for protection. The wood of the cypress tree is also sacred to some sects of Christianity who believe the cypress was one of the sources for the wood of the True Cross used in the crucifixion of Jesus, as once cut, the tree will never flourish and grow again.¹⁰² The evidence for this idea comes from Isaiah 60:13, which states that “The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the cypress together to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.”¹⁰³ The phrase “place of my feet” links the cypress wood to the crucifixion, as these words signify the foot rest on which Jesus’ feet were nailed. The placement of the cypress tree in the foreground of Vincent’s painting, and the large proportions compared to the rest of the scene, give the tree a great importance in the work. *Starry Night* also served as a “vehicle of his emotional condition” specifically “the darkest manifestations of personal symbolism.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ernst Lehner, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants, and Trees* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1960) 57

¹⁰¹ Lehner, *Folklore*, 57

¹⁰² Naifeh, Van Gogh

¹⁰³ Isaiah 60:13 NAB

¹⁰⁴ CDC. 2003. “Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890). The Prison Courtyard (1890).” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 9, no. 9 (September). https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/9/9/ac-0909_article.

One of the most frequent symbols of religion seen in Van Gogh's paintings, fields of wheat are depicted in drawings, paintings, and numerous sketches in his letters to Theo. Van Gogh's first representation of wheat was in 1885, when he completed *Sheaves of Wheat in a Field* during his time in Nuenen, the Netherlands (Figure 6). This work, painted only a few months after the famous *Potato Eaters*, is one of the first scenes in which Vincent attempted to branch out from his grey toned painting style. The large stack of wheat takes up the majority of the composition- it is clearly the main focus of this work. Differing from his later *Wheat Fields with Cypresses*, the wheat in this landscape stands out as an obvious addition to the land. In the 1889 scene, the landscape and the wheat flow together with a sense of movement seen through his brushstrokes and the color, signaling his change in style after his move to southern France.

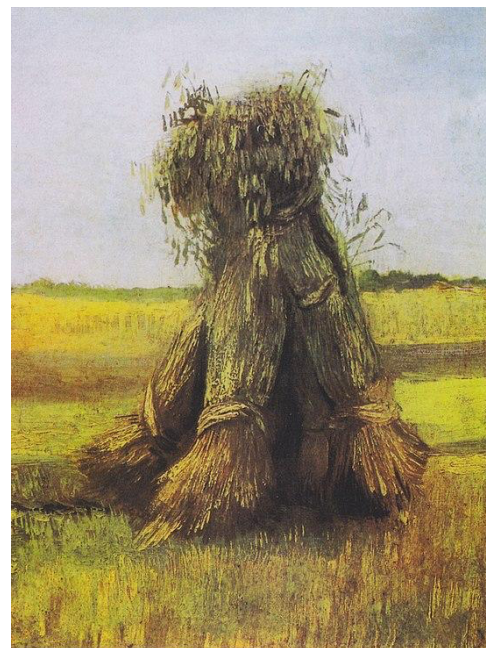


Figure 6- Vincent Van Gogh, *Sheaves of Wheat in a Field*, 1885, oil on canvas, Kröller Muller Museum, Otterlo

The *Wheat Field Series* is one of two series that Van Gogh created, the other being the series of Sunflowers. As the largest series in his oeuvre, there are over a dozen paintings with scenes of wheat fields, with the latest completed in 1890. Van Gogh had depicted wheat before his 1879 breakdown in Belgium but depicted the majority of this theme at his time in St. Rémy-de-Provence. Cliff Edwards writes that Vincent's "life was a quest for unification, a search for how to integrate the ideas of religion, art, literature, and nature that motivated him."¹⁰⁵ Wheat became a common subject in his later paintings, culminating from his interest in manual labor,

¹⁰⁵ Cliff Edwards, "Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest"

natural, and religious symbols. Wheat has long been used as a Christian symbol, as it is known to represent the cycles of life, as well as growth. Biblical parables often spoke of the importance of wheat, including the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, often known as the Parable of the Weeds. Located in Matthew 13, this parable is a story Jesus tells his followers directly after sharing the Parable of the Sower. Jesus said,

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.”¹⁰⁶

When asked if Jesus wished for the weeds to be pulled up from the ground, he responded “No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.”¹⁰⁷ In this tale, the wheat is a symbol of the Gospels that Jesus preaches, which results in the growth of Christians. At the same time, the Devil is being spread as the ‘weeds. The wheat and the weeds look almost exactly the same at an immature stage, making it hard to discern who belongs in the Kingdom and who does not. At the end of the day, the servants, or the followers of Christ, should assist in planting seeds, and making sure they fully develop. It is not their job to judge who is or is not a member of God’s kingdom, that is the job of the harvester, or Jesus. It is only the job of Christ to judge the soul of a person, furthering the idea that Calvinist’s cannot have help on their journey to salvation, as it has already been decided for them. A person’s soul is often torn between being wheat and being a “tare” especially if it is not proven that they are chosen for everlasting life. In fact, there are parallels between the Parable of the Tares and his own life. Vincent would have felt as though he was not a chosen one and would have had a complicated relationship with his soul because of this.

Perhaps he identified as a weed among the wheat, hoping for acceptance, or hoped that he was a

¹⁰⁶ Matthew 13:24-28 NAB

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 13:24-28 NAB

wheat all along, unable to self-identify amongst the weeds. However, he continued to persevere and hoped that his “faith may not fail when our soul greatly desires to be sifted as wheat.”¹⁰⁸

In his paintings of wheat, Vincent used his background of religious knowledge as well as his personal beliefs and emotions to create a sense of meaning for his viewers. In a letter to Theo in 1889, Vincent writes that he hopes his family brings to him

““What nature, clods of earth, the grass, yellow wheat, the peasant, are for me, in other words, that you find in your love for people something not only to work for, but to comfort and restore you when there is a need.”¹⁰⁹

Vincent also wrote to his sister Wilimien, "What the germinating force is in a grain of wheat, love is in us." Vincent found a strong connection between his own emotions and the cycle of wheat, and the reference of this in his letters prove his fascination with the natural subject.

In his 1889 painting, *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, Vincent creates a colorful scene of moving skies, seen before in his earlier painting *Starry Night*, as well as the repeated symbol of the cypress tree (Figure 7). Originally exhibited at the St. Paul-de-Mausole mental asylum in St. Remy-de-Provence, and the most well-known of his wheat fields series, this painting gives viewers an opportunity to study his new artistic style as well as color scheme. This later painting of wheat contains earth tones



Figure 7- Vincent Van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Cypresses*, 1889, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

as well as bright colors, which contrasts with his earlier portrayals of wheat during his time in the

¹⁰⁸ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, February 26th, 1877

¹⁰⁹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, 1889

Netherlands. Vincent's style at the end of his life is known for being extremely experimental, with the use of expressive colors and shapes, with the addition of thick impasto to the canvas, giving each painting a three-dimensional look. The vehement emphasis of each aspect of the composition through the use of impasto gives his work a physicality that was not commonly seen in the late 19th century. This stylistic movement follows the significant Impressionist movement beginning in the 1860s, which rebelled against artistic tradition, directly inspiring Vincent's color and subject choices. The style in which he painted the wheat matches the rolling swirls of the sky, binding them together in a sense of movement. When looking at this painting, "there seems to be nothing that matters beyond this undulating field where only a few stalks break the horizon."¹¹⁰ Writing to Theo, Vincent describes this painting as

"a canvas of cypresses with some ears of wheat, some poppies, a blue sky like a piece of Scotch plaid; the former painted with a thick impasto like the Monticelli's, and the wheat field in the sun, which represents the extreme heat, very thick too."¹¹¹

The vibrancy of color creates a sense of heat, as well as the thickness of the paint at the top of the composition. The use of impasto gives the sky a texture that draws the viewer in, as if they are in the scene looking up at the clouds above. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where this painting resides, "Van Gogh regarded the present work as one of his "best" summer landscapes and was prompted that September to make two studio renditions."¹¹² Jean Schwind calls *Wheat Field with Cypresses* the "daylight counterpart" to *Starry Night* and goes further in connecting both paintings to the poetry of American poet Walt Whitman. In her essay "Van Gogh's 'Starry Night' and Whitman: A Study in Source," Schwind uses both of Vincent's

¹¹⁰ Coughlin, *Van Gogh and Nature*

¹¹¹ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, July 2nd, 1889

¹¹² "Wheat Field with Cypresses," Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 29th, 2021, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436535>

paintings as a comparison to a number of Walt Whitman's poems, furthering the connection between Vincent and American Transcendentalism.

Chapter 5- The Sower, and Millet

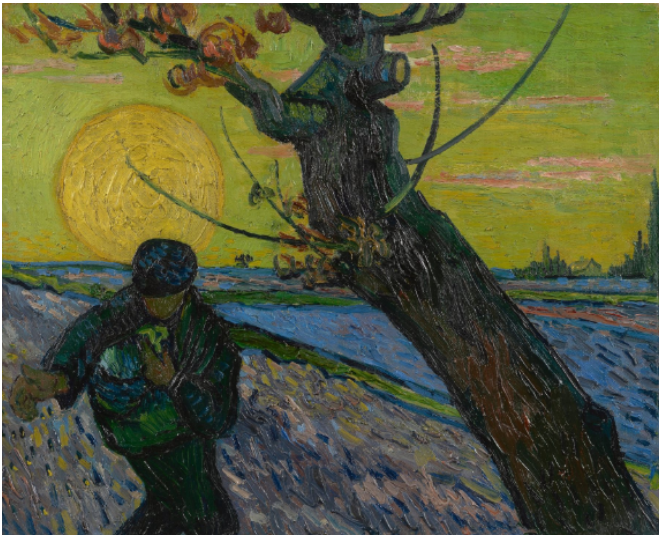


Figure 8- Vincent Van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum



Figure 9- Vincent Van Gogh, *The Sower at Sunset*, 1888, oil on canvas, Kröller Muller, Otterlo

As well as wheat and cypress trees, other themes drawn from religious stories and symbols that Vincent often used in his art include the motif of the sower, seen in his version of *The Sower* inspired by Jean-Francois Millet (Figures 8 and 9). Vincent finds equality between himself and a man who ploughs, comparing his perseverance with his art to “ploughing on like a man possessed.” When writing about his portrayals of sowers, he even notes that these works will “contribute to curing” his mental illness.

As a religious symbol, the sower comes primarily from the Parable of the Sower.¹¹³ In this story, Jesus tells a large crowd of people about a sower who unsuccessfully scattered his seed on a path. The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the people in parables, instead of speaking clearly. In response, Jesus says

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along

¹¹³ Matthew 13:19-21 NAB

the path. **20** The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. **21** But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”¹¹⁴

In summary, this parable is an allegory about God’s kingdom, and the growth of the word of God within the people who believe in him. The birds who “snatches away” the seeds represent Satan. Vincent saw sowing as a way for people to work with the power of nature and life, which is something he struggled with in his mental health, as mentioned in a letter saying “the sower and the wheat sheaf stood for eternity, and the reaper and his scythe for irrevocable death.” Throughout his artistic career, Vincent had completed at least 30 drawings of sowers, as well as multiple paintings. From the very beginning of his life as an artist, Vincent was inspired by Jean-François Millet’s portrayals of the land and its laborers.

Millet was a French painter and founder of the Barbizon school in rural France. He was a painter of rural scenes who appreciated the work ethic and lifestyle of peasants, as well as people in the working class. One of his most well-known paintings, *The Gleaners*, painted in 1857, depicts women stooping in the fields to pick up the harvest leftovers, dedicating a beautiful composition for a non-glamorous act of labor (Figure 10). This subject matter was common for Millet, as he offered the figures of his paintings a sense of heroism with a large focus in the picture. In this painting, light illuminates the women as they carry out one of the lowest jobs in



Figure 10- Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, oil on canvas, Musee D'Orsay

¹¹⁴ Matthew 13, 19-22 NAB

society, shedding a glow onto them giving them a sense of power. The field behind them is bathed in a light so powerful and golden that the whole composition is enveloped in this sense of light. The light of the sun “accentuates the volumes in the foreground and gives the gleaners a sculptural look.”¹¹⁵ This sculptural look is a direct tribute to Michelangelo, who was one of Millet’s main inspirations due to his idealistic rendering of human forms, and realistic bodily proportions. This choice of lighting “picks out their hands, necks, shoulders and backs, and brightens the colors of their clothing.”¹¹⁶ Through the choices Millet makes of “sober pictorial procedures,” he gives these gleaners an “emblematic value, free of any hint of miserabilism.”¹¹⁷ This reinforces the sense of heroism he gives the job they are completing.

The theme of the *Sower* is Millet’s most repetitive motif, and his painting of the figure in 1850 served as a direct inspiration for Vincent’s paintings (Figure 11). Vincent describes his first reaction to seeing one of Millet’s works, writing ““I felt like saying, ‘Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is Holy Ground.’” (LT 29, 1875, p.28)¹¹⁸ His rendition of this figure “emphasizes the dignity- even heroism- of rural labor.”¹¹⁹ His execution of the peasant “evokes the



Figure 11- Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850, oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts

¹¹⁵ “Gleaners,” Google Arts and Culture, Musee D’Orsay, March 29th, 2021, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/gleaners/GgHsT2RumWxbtw?hl=en>

¹¹⁶ “Gleaners,” Google Arts and Culture, Musee D’Orsay, March 29th, 2021

¹¹⁷ “Gleaners,” Google Arts and Culture, Musee D’Orsay, March 29th, 2021

¹¹⁸ Park, Vincent Van Gogh’s Christian Faith, 29

¹¹⁹ “The Sower,” Museum of Fine Arts Boston, March 29th, 2021, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/31601>

rustic land itself,” and the figure seems as though it is “painted with the earth that he sows.”¹²⁰ This idea is translated through Vincent’s renderings of the same motif, including his copies of *Sower* in 1888.

In 1881, Vincent copied Millet’s *Sower* in pen and ink, wholeheartedly turning his attention to the sower and his sheaf, symbols of “a longing for the infinite.”¹²¹ To Vincent, the planter of grain “naturally follows the reaper, to generate the growth cycle all over again, creating a symbol of the renewal of life.”¹²² Vincent creates similarities between himself and his paintings, specifically during his time in Auvers painting the Wheat Fields. At the beginning of his time in St. Rémy, he was only able to paint what he could see through the bars of his window. When writing to Theo about his rendition of Millet’s *Sower*, he creates a commonality between his situation and the field of wheat. He writes, “It’s all yellow except for a line of violet hills – a pale, blond yellow. I myself find that funny, that I saw it like that through the iron bars of a cell.”¹²³ In June of 1888, he went further and painted a copy of Millet’s *Sower*, taking his admiration further of the depictions of wheat as well as peasants completing manual labor. *Sower at Sunset* represented Vincent’s rendition of Millet’s painting, but with brighter colors and more contrasts (Figure 9). Vincent painted *The Sower* in Arles in November 1888. This painting shows heavy religious tones in relation to the sower, as the large yellow sun is placed right above the sower’s head, signifying a halo.

“The significance of Van Gogh's sowers is amplified and enlarged by his late-life fascination with harvest themes, particularly the reaper, who is both the antithesis and

¹²⁰ “The Sower,” Museum of Fine Arts Boston, March 29th, 2021

¹²¹ Evert Van Uitert, *Van Gogh Drawings* (Woodstock, N.Y: Overlook, 1978) 189

¹²² Uitert, *Van Gogh Drawings*, 218

¹²³ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 6th, 1889

counterpart of the sower in the metaphorical cycle of life and death to which Van Gogh was increasingly attentive as he contemplated suicide at St.-Rémy and Auvers.”¹²⁴

When referencing this painting in a letter to Theo, he notes that “the reaper is finished, I think it will be one that you’ll place in your home- it’s an image of death as the great book of nature speaks to us about it.”¹²⁵ This reference implies that nature was as important to Calvinists as the doctrine itself. The great book of nature he speaks of is a more symbolic idea, not actually referencing a book.

Sowers and reapers are archetypal symbols of birth and death and happen to be the most constant themes in Vincent’s art, especially in his Wheat Fields series. They appear as early as 1880 in his drawings, and culminate in *Wheat Field with Reaper*, painted during the last month



Figure 12- Vincent Van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Reaper*, 1889, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

seems impossible to finish. The yellow tonality of this painting makes the peasant working in the

of his life (Figure 12).¹²⁶ This painting starkly differs from his previous renderings of reapers, as well as his inspiration, Millet. The reaper is small compared to the vast landscape of wheat and is almost swallowed by the field. The figure seems lost amongst a large sea of golden wheat, and the job of reaping

¹²⁴ Judy Sund, *The Shower and the Sheaf: Biblical Metaphor in the Art of Vincent van Gogh* (The Art Bulletin, 1988) <https://caa.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00043079.1988.10788600#.YBdzN-IKiCR>.

¹²⁵ Vincent Van Gogh to Theo Van Gogh, September 6th, 1889

¹²⁶ Eliza E. Rathbone, *Van Gogh Repetitions* (Yale University Press: Cleveland Museum of Art) 163

field become one with the wheat itself, which is also enhanced by the lines of the figure matching the curves of the wheat shafts. In his letters, he writes

“I then saw in this reaper- a vague figure struggling like a devil in the full heat of the day to reach the end of his toil- I then saw the image of death in it, in this sense that humanity would be the wheat being reaped. So, if you like it's the opposite of that Sower I tried before. But in this death, nothing sad, it takes place in broad daylight with a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.”

This seems almost as if he is foreshadowing to his death, which took place in broad daylight with “a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold.” Vincent also potentially referenced his death in one of the last paintings he completed during his time in St. Rémy, *Wheatfield with Crows* (Figure 13). This popular painting includes the repeated motif of wheat, with the added turbulence of a stormy sky and a flock of crows swarming the field. The path also has no end through the field, creating a physical and perhaps mental dead-end.



Figure 13- Vincent Van Gogh, *Wheat Field with Crows*, 1890, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Concluding Thoughts

After a life full of doubt, mental illness, despair, and a lack of hope for his future, Vincent's time on Earth ended tragically with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the stomach. He lived his life with the thought that he could not be saved, and yet to this day, Vincent Van Gogh remains a household name throughout the world. He has left an immense legacy, with his art on view in museums all over the world. His expressive use of color and texture influenced the Expressionist movement, as well as Fauvism and Modernist painting in general. His oeuvre has been studied and copied by scholars and artists for over a century, and his style is mimicked to this day. After all of the trials and tribulations, he ended up becoming more successful than his family, or the world, could have imagined.

The main elements of his life that are discussed through scholarship are primarily his downwards spiral into mental illness, and his turbulent relationship with villagers and artists, such as Paul Gauguin. He lived his entire life with these impossible expectations instilled upon him from his family, his friends, and the religion he belonged to his whole life. He was constantly trying to prove himself to everyone in his life, including himself. He never succeeded in the traditional way his father wanted him to, but he found coping mechanisms and opportunities in his own ways to find peace and clarity. He found hope in nature, specifically the symbols of wheat, stars, and cypress trees.

Vincent “subordinated accuracy and technique in artworks to feeling.”¹²⁷ His priority within his artistic career was to portray his feelings and emotions in his paintings, rather than showing off impressive artistic techniques. His style went through considerable change over

¹²⁷ Will Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis of Vincent van Gogh’s Fundamental Artistic Disposition,” (Bristol; University of Bristol, 2020)

time, “from the dark and somber hues of his early works through the color-filled quasi-pointillist experiments picked up contact with post-Impressionist painters in France, to the expressive impasto of his later paintings.”¹²⁸ However much his technical style changed, the subject matter formed a “unifying thread” from his earliest drawings and paintings, to his “later renderings of sunflowers, cypresses, cornfields, shepherds, reapers and sowers in Arles.”¹²⁹

Through this thesis, I analyzed Vincent’s religious symbols of wheat, sowers, and cypress trees and have demonstrated his repeated use of Christian symbolism and the work ethic associated with Calvinism. This analysis adds to our knowledge of his mindset during the end of his life. Looking at Vincent’s life as an artist who used the lens of his specific religious upbringing gives art historians and general readers a new perspective through which to view his paintings. His oeuvre is riddled with religious symbols and stories, hidden under simple themes of natural compositions. This knowledge of Vincent’s specific interests in terms of religion greatly expands our understanding of his art. His true innovation was combining the severe religious upbringing in Calvinism and the creation of his own style of art to convey his beliefs, as well as using it as a way of finding meaning in his own life.

¹²⁸ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis of Vincent,”

¹²⁹ Atkinson, “The Sociogenesis of Vincent,”

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