

Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*:
Insights from Poetry, Art History, and Astronomy

Vincent S. Stassi

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Dr. Elaine O'Brien

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Vincent van Gogh painted *Starry Night* in 1889, one year before his death. Although the oil on canvas painting possesses multiple interpretations, one evident theme is van Gogh's communication of vastness. The painting depicts a small town, verified as the view of van Gogh from his hospital window at Saint-Rémy, juxtaposed against a blue and vast night sky filled with bright stars. The various interpretations of *Starry Night* come from van Gogh's influences with poetry, personal religious conflict, astronomy, depression, all of which convey van Gogh's expressionism in creating his unique view of reality.

Point of View

Lewis M. Layman in "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'D Night' in Vincent van Gogh's 'Starry Night'" takes a point of view that van Gogh attempted to provide a visual depiction of excerpts from Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*. For example, Layman concludes that "this passage [*Song of Myself* 11.435-437] was a primary inspiration for 'Starry Night.'"¹ Although Layman makes the argument that *Starry Night* includes "every image"² from Whitman's poem, Layman understands the possibility of numerous other influences. Layman asserts, "I doubt there is one 'true answer.'"³ Layman's point of view establishes that *Starry Night* had poetic influence; however, Layman remains open to the idea that other interpretations of van Gogh's painting may exist.

Lauren Soth, in the article "Van Gogh's Agony," establishes the point of view as an art historian. Soth intends to use primary and secondary evidence from the time of van Gogh to illustrate an interpretation of *Starry Night*. For example, Soth states, "here I shall discuss the *Starry Night* in light of its conceptual history: when it came into van Gogh's mind and how his ideas about it developed."⁴ Furthermore, Soth's use of excerpts from van Gogh's letters to his friends and family establish a bias toward van Gogh's willingness to paint the *Starry Night*. Soth

states, “This excerpt shows that van Gogh already thought a starry night a suitable subject . . . two concepts – imaginative exaltation and consolation – are, as will be seen, basic to an understanding of the *Starry Night*.”⁵ Through Soth’s perspective, one can see the emphasis on the events of van Gogh’s life as the means for shaping the painting of *Starry Night*.

Charles A. Whitney, in “The Skies of Vincent van Gogh,” provides the view point of an astronomer. Through Whitney’s expertise in star constellations, Whitney compares the night sky in *Starry Night* with scientific astronomical observations and estimates at the time van Gogh painted in Saint-Rémy. Whitney’s interest in *Starry Night* lies in “the remarkable coincidence between the swirling pattern at the center of the painting and drawing that had been made several decades earlier by astronomer Lord Rosse.”⁶ Consequently, Whitney acknowledges his lack of expertise in art history: “being naïve in art history, I decided to make a virtue of necessity and stay close to the paintings themselves and to van Gogh’s letters.”⁷ Although Whitney has the perspective of an astronomer, Whitney believes in the possibility that *Starry Night* came from van Gogh’s direct observations and knowledge of the sky.

Article Summary

Lewis M. layman, in “Echoes of Walt Whitman’s ‘Bare-Bosom’d Night’ in Vincent van Gogh’s ‘Starry Night,’” compares excerpts from Walt Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself* with the visual elements in Vincent van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. Layman asserts that Vincent van Gogh’s most evident influence for painting *Starry Night* comes from the depiction of specific excerpts of Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself*.

Van Gogh conveys Whitman’s descriptions of two universal entities existing together. For example, Whitman writes how the night’s feminine characteristics of “bare-bosom’d” and “nourishing” flow on to the earth’s masculine characteristics of “liquid trees” and “mountains

misty-opt” through “the vitreous poor of the full moon.”⁸ Similarly, van Gogh depicts Whitman’s “bare bosom’d night” through the rounded hills being painted the color of the vast blue sky hovering over the town. Objects such as the Cypress and the steeple may convey masculine objects, while the moon, stars, and blue sky convey feminine qualities. The existence of the two entities is evident through the positioning of the steeple and the Cypress in the sky without invading the space of the circular stars.⁹ Layman further asserts Marco Edo Tralbaut’s interpretation that the crescent-shape moon brings to mind the Chinese symbol of the Yin and Yang, two universal forces in existence.¹⁰

Other excerpts express the interaction of the two universal entities among van Gogh’s painting. For instance, van Gogh paints the sky and the town in close proximity. The sky and the town positioned next to each other represent Whitman’s statement, “press close bare bosom’d night – press close magnetic nourishing night.”¹¹ Furthermore, the spiral motion of the stars in *Starry Night* may reflect Whitman’s phrase “night of the large few stars.”¹² Each star was painted uniquely, which signifies Whitman’s perspective that “each blade of grass is unique yet similar to every other one.”¹³

Most apparent is the ability of van Gogh to present a picture that is awe-inspiring and personal. An example exists in van Gogh’s juxtaposition of the town, peaceful and quiet, with the vibrant stars in the night sky, agitated and wild. The comparison between the town and the night sky is most similar to the excerpt, “still nodding night – mad naked summer night.”¹⁴ The display of the town is represented as going to sleep, while the night sky displays the interaction of light and swirls. Additionally, layman asserts Whitman’s influence is further evident in a description van Gogh wrote to his sister: “the great starlit vault of heaven.”¹⁵ Van Gogh intended to express his personal feelings about Whitman’s poem in painting a night with stars.

Through the letter and excerpts, one can see the impact Whitman's writings may have had in influencing van Gogh.

Although evidence exists that Vincent van Gogh had numerous influences for painting *Starry Night*, Whitman's poem *Song of Myself* provides sufficient evidence for being an important influence of van Gogh. Likewise, Layman's interpretation of the poem establishes one probable approach to analyzing the painting of the nineteenth century painter.

Lauren Soth, in "Van Gogh's Agony," interprets the meaning of van Gogh's *Starry Night* through letters, writings, and other art works of van Gogh. Soth argues that *Starry Night* reflects van Gogh's religious sentiments. Additionally, memory and observational cues during van Gogh's life in Saint-Rémy provide further insight into van Gogh's painting.

Soth discusses that van Gogh was yearning to paint a night with stars. In three letters, one to his brother Theo, another to his sister Wilhelmina, and the other to his friend Bernard, van Gogh expresses the ideal night with stars. Soth cites how van Gogh implies that two previous paintings, *Café Terrace at Night* and *Starry Night over the Rhone*, are merely observations of a night over an urban landscape.¹⁶ Furthermore, van Gogh wants a painting that possesses wonderment, and not simply observation. Soth asserts that van Gogh's ideal night with stars depicts a landscape and requires use of creative thought.

Even more significant is van Gogh's transformation of ideas from observation and memory. One example of observation is evident through van Gogh's sketches at the time of his admittance into "the hospital of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole at Saint-Rémy."¹⁷ The sketches, as Soth describes, provide preparatory elements evident in *Starry Night*. For example, from van Gogh's room in the hospital, van Gogh could observe the hills and cypresses. On the other hand, images that did not reflect his observations, such as the church and moon, come from his memory. Soth notes the church changed from a dome to a steeple because van Gogh admired Breton's painting

Festival of Saint John that depicted a steeple. In addition, the steeple may have also reminded van Gogh of the church in his homeland, Brabant.¹⁸ The combination of both van Gogh's memory and observation would form the imaginative quality of *Starry Night*.

Moreover, insights into van Gogh's writings reveal intentions for painting a night with stars. One intention is to paint reality in a purer and higher state. Van Gogh writes about how Gauguin and Bernard, both artists, encouraged van Gogh to paint with "imagination."¹⁹ Likewise, the artist Delacroix, mentioned in another letter, influenced van Gogh to use the colors of "citron-yellow and Prussian blue."²⁰ Van Gogh was impressed by how Delacroix displayed meaning through color. Similarly, van Gogh's use of the colors in the sky of *Starry Night* allowed the depiction of a sky "more serene and pure than reality."²¹ Soth indicates that van Gogh's intentions to paint *Starry Night* was similarly evident in van Gogh's painting *La Berceuse*. Soth explains "van Gogh paints the reality before him, at the same time conceptually exalting it onto a higher level of meaning."²² Another intention was to paint an "image of consolation."²³ Soth describes van Gogh as both a missionary and artist, which influenced him to continually "comfort his audience . . . compulsive usage to console his fellow man for the miseries of life."²⁴ Moreover, van Gogh's use of the moon further suggests the intention of providing consolation. Soth notes that van Gogh paints the crescent moon in *The Evening Walk* and *Au Charbonnage*: "the crescent [represents] deeply felt emotion about his anticipated life serving the miners of the Borinage."²⁵ Through elements such as the moon and colors, van Gogh is able to express his intentions of presenting a pure and consoling reality.

Soth emphasizes the meaning of *Starry Night* is van Gogh's representation of the biblical event, the Agony in the Garden. Soth interprets letters, for which van Gogh expresses his view of life: "viewed human existence as a long suffering."²⁶ Therefore, the biblical event of the

Agony in the Garden, where Jesus attempts to face his reality of a coming crucifixion, coincides with van Gogh's own religious struggles. Likewise, van Gogh was interested in painting the biblical scene, for he collected art works of the scene from artists, such as Corot, Ary Scheffer, and Dolci.²⁷ During van Gogh's ambition to paint a night with stars, van Gogh also struggled to paint his own Agony in the Garden. Consequently, as Soth concludes, van Gogh's inability to paint the Agony in the Garden became a reflection of van Gogh's agony when painting *Starry Night*.

The culmination of van Gogh's experiences as an artist and missionary resulted in a unique expression of a night with stars. Soth illustrates that influences from van Gogh's past, observations at Saint-Rémy, and religious sentiments provide a powerful insight into the meaning of *Starry Night*.

Charles A. Whitney, in the article "The Skies of Vincent Van Gogh," provides scientific evidence of astronomy as a means to explain the origins of *Starry Night* and other van Gogh night sky paintings. Whitney proposes that astronomy was a central influence in van Gogh's depiction of reality among the night sky. Thus, Whitney believes *Starry Night* draws from van Gogh's observations and knowledge of a morning and evening sky over Saint-Rémy.

Van Gogh's interest in painting observations of the night sky is evident through several letters and paintings van Gogh created prior to *Starry Night*. For example, van Gogh describes his observations of the night sky: "the blue depth the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, pink, more brilliant, more sparkling gemlike."²⁸ Van Gogh's exploration of the stars demonstrates his interest in the night sky. Van Gogh further emphasizes his interest in the night sky in a letter sent to his sister: "I really enjoy doing a painting on the spot at night."²⁹ In addition, van Gogh depicts the accurate detail of the Big Dipper in his painting *Starry Night over*

the Rhone. Whitney conveys that the stars displayed in the painting are so exact that one can use the painting “as a navigational tool.”³⁰ However, Whitney notes that the night sky is a northern sky depicted over a southward-looking view point. Although the picture does not convey the actual view over the Rhone, the detail of the night sky shows van Gogh’s attention to astronomy.

Van Gogh’s painting *Starry Night* is most significant in demonstrating the ability to use astronomy in painting. Whitney states that a letter to Theo confirming van Gogh’s completion of *Starry Night* coincides with an estimated date of clear skies over Saint-Rémy. The weather forecast indicates the probable nature of viewing and painting observations of a night sky. Furthermore, Whitney identifies that the “tilt of the crescent moon indicates that the painter was looking east.”³¹ Additionally, van Gogh further portrays his knowledge of astronomy through the bright star to the right of the Cypress, which depicts Venus, a bright planet of the evening sky.³² In addition, Whitney interprets the swirling patterns as van Gogh’s painting of the Milky Way in the evening sky. Similarly, van Gogh represents the remaining stars as the Northern Cross. The night sky shows a transition from the evening to predawn sky through light brush strokes in the center for representing a star named Vega, far beyond in the vastness of space.³³ The evidence illustrates that van Gogh’s *Starry Night* is an actual view from his hospital window. The spiral patterns of the star also indicate the influence “of spiral galaxies in books by the popular French writer/astronomer Camille Flammarion.”³⁴

In conclusion, Whitney states that *Starry Night* provides “a visual reference to the Milky Way as a spiral nebula – and perhaps even to those mistral and the ‘winds of the sky,’”³⁵ Even in another painting, *Cyprus with a Star*, van Gogh depicts knowledge of an evening star and lunar eclipse. Most important, *Starry Night* demonstrates the influence of astronomy in the life of van Gogh.

Article Critique

Layman's assertions develop a strong argument because Layman effectively links visual elements from van Gogh's painting with specific excerpts from Whitman's poem *Song of Myself*. One example occurs through Layman citing key words, such as "magnetic" and "nourishing,"³⁶ to describe the relationship between the earth and sky. The ability to compare the literary words in Whitman's poem with visual elements creates a valid argument. Furthermore, Layman uses excerpts to establish the context for which the objects in *Starry Night*, such as the Cypress tree and stars, were painted to illustrate the words of Whitman. Layman's technique is most effective because one cannot question evident words and illustrations. However, Layman's limited use of expert testimony inhibits the strength of the article's argument. Layman only uses two major sources of expert testimony from Justin Kaplan and Marc Edo Tralbaut. Even more significant is Layman fails to provide these two experts background or relevance to the article. Although Layman is able to acknowledge alternative interpretations, Layman fails to explore those other perspectives. A stronger argument would entail refutation and sound expert testimony. Overall, Layman makes clear and concise points in interpreting van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

Soth presents a very persuasive argument because the article provides logical organization and convincing evidence. The logical organization of the article establishes a formulaic approach to prove the meaning of *Starry Night*. For example, Soth uses deductive reasoning to explain van Gogh's painting from its subject matter to the meaning in its expressionism. Clear and logical presentation is evident through the use of sub-headings and side-by-side comparisons of letter excerpts and interpretations. Furthermore, Soth proves that *Starry Night* reflects van Gogh's own life experiences through letters, other art works, and historical events and places. Most convincing is Soth refutes several alternative view points. Soth asserts that Meyer Shapiro and Sven Loevgren were inaccurate in the determining that

Starry Night represents biblical passages from Revelation and Joseph's dream, respectively.

Soth contended that these experts' interpretations included the depiction of the sun, for which is not evident in *Starry Night*. The ability to refute and provide evidence of van Gogh's interest in the biblical event, *Agony in the Garden*, provides the strongest support for Soth's point of view.

Although Soth fails to provide other possible influences, such as poetry and astronomy, the article's use of convincing sources, logical organization, and few argument flaws provide the most persuasive article.

Although Whitney makes a convincing argument that van Gogh based *Starry Night* on observations of the sky over Saint-Rémy, Whitney's argument is severely weakened by its emphasis on the sky and its lack of emphasis on related objects in the painting. First, Whitney provides a convincing argument because the article contains scientific evidence of the stars and direct excerpts from letters. Second, the examination of several paintings depicting night skies with stars demonstrates a trend that van Gogh made a continual effort to display his observations of the night sky. The trend links several paintings of van Gogh to *Starry Night*; thus, Whitney is able to support the assumption that van Gogh was a knowledgeable person of astronomy. Third, Whitney's emphasis on the sky establishes a clear and concise argument, which allows for the exploration of a single concept. On the other hand, the attention to only the night sky weakens Whitney's argument. Whitney's inability to include alternate interpretations hindered the argument because the argument displays a bias toward only an aspect of the painting. Indeed, the night sky is central to conveying the vastness of space and time. However, the relationship between the night sky and the town is most important. Whitney's lack of elaboration between the sky and landscape weakened the argument, for that relationship was central to ascertaining the significance of *Starry Night*. Although Whitney establishes a credible argument that van

Gogh used astronomy as inspiring tool for depicting the night sky, Whitney fails to identify a central meaning in the painting to explain van Gogh's view of the night sky.

Summary Interpretation

Vincent van Gogh's painting *Starry Night* encompasses poetry, personal religious conflict, and astronomy. Its central theme is conveying the vastness of the universe through the scale of hierarchy between the small town and the enormous night sky. The ability for a painting to have multiple interpretations may indicate that the artist van Gogh was a complex individual. Indeed, numerous factors may have been influential at the time he entered the hospital at Saint-Rémy. Furthermore, the death of van Gogh only a year after he completed *Starry Night* may further demonstrate many things were in the imagination of the great nineteenth century artist.

Although uncertainty may exist about the exact meaning and origins of *Starry Night*, the commonality of the three perspectives and probably other interpretations lie in the relationship between the power of the human psyche and the power of natural existence. Van Gogh's depiction of the stars illustrates how feelings of wonder and astonishment can carry a person to explore beyond the minute existence of a town. The bird's eye view emphasizes the vastness of space and time. Moreover, van Gogh's complexity draws his multiple influences, from fellow artists, missionary work, memories, studies of poetry and astronomy, perspective of life, to create a depiction of reality that is greater and purer. Van Gogh's ability to elevate reality into the realm of imagination is distinctive among canonical art. *Starry Night* remains exemplar in grasping the awe-inspiring quality of the night sky in relation to the fleeting and diminutive nature of human existence in the world.

Notes

1. Lewis M. Layman, "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'D Night' in Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*," *American Notes & Queries* 22, no. 7-8 (1984): 108, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=2&sid=e7e3b556-b7a3-45b4-93fb-b8dcd98bafef1%40sessionmgr3>.

2. *Ibid.*, 108.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Lauren Soth, "Van Gogh's *Agony*," *Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986): 301, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=2&sid=e7e3b556-b7a3-45b4-93fb-b8dcd98bafef1%40sessionmgr3>.

5. *Ibid.*, 301.

6. Charles A. Whitney, "The Skies of Vincent van Gogh," *Art History* 9, no. 3 (1986): 351, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=2&sid=e7e3b556-b7a3-45b4-93fb-b8dcd98bafef1%40sessionmgr3>.

7. *Ibid.*, 351.

8. Layman, "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'D Night' in Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*," 107.

9. *Ibid.*, 107.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 108.

15. *Ibid.*, 105.

16. Soth, "Van Gogh's *Agony*," 302.

17. *Ibid.*, 303.

18. *Ibid.*, 305.

19. Ibid., 306
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 307.
22. Ibid., 308.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 309.
26. Ibid., 311.
27. Ibid.
28. Whitney, "The Skies of Vincent van Gogh," 352.
29. Ibid., 353.
30. Ibid., 354.
31. Ibid., 356.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 357-358.
34. Ibid., 358.
35. Ibid., 359.
36. Layman, "Echoes of Walt Whitman's 'Bare-Bosom'D Night' in Vincent van Gogh's Starry Night," 107.

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<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=7&hid=2&sid=e7e3b556-b7a3-45b4-93fb-b8dcd98bafef1%40sessionmgr3>.