

**Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the
Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh**

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CERTIFICATE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that thesis entitled “Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh” is an authentic record of my studies and research carried out under the guidance of Dr. Fr. Babu K.T, Research Supervisor, Research and Postgraduate Department of English, St Aloysius College, Thrissur, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English. I hereby certify that no part of this work has been submitted or published for the award of any degree, diploma, title, or recognition.

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Varsha Binth Saif

DEDICATION

To my family, friends, and teachers

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Abstract

Vincent Willem van Gogh (30 March 1853 – 29 July 1890) is a Post-Impressionist Dutch artist of the 19th century. He was born in Groot-Zundert, the Southern Netherlands. His father was a Calvinist pastor named Theodorus van Gogh, and his mother was Anna Cornelia Carbentus. After a failed career as an art dealer, teacher, bookseller, and evangelist, Van Gogh decided to pursue his art career at the age of 27. Despite a career spanning just a few years until his untimely death at the age of 37, Van Gogh displayed remarkable creativity, creating nearly 900 paintings along with numerous drawings and sketches. His fame extends not only for his artworks but also for the 903 letters he wrote, expressing his philosophical and spiritual insights to society. Even though Van Gogh was hailed as a great artist posthumously, his artwork significantly impacted 20th-century art because of its distinctive art style, individual themes, vivid colors, and profoundly emotional connotations.

The thesis "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh" focuses on divinity and spirituality reflected in the life and works of Vincent van Gogh. His spiritual and divine reflections are evident in the religious imagery present in his paintings and letters. This thesis also reveals the lesser-known aspects of Van Gogh's life, highlighting how he utilized art as a medium to champion social justice and equality through his works. The selected paintings and letters of Van Gogh are analyzed in the light of religious imagery to demonstrate how Vincent van Gogh combined art and religion to communicate his beliefs and speak up for the oppressed. His letters and paintings are explored and analyzed as sources of his spiritual, religious, and aesthetic ideas.

The various chapters in the thesis analyze the important phases in Van Gogh's life and career. The first chapter, "Introduction," offers an overview of Van Gogh's life and artistic contributions. It elucidates the thesis's title, research methodology, literature review, chapter summaries, and underscores the significance of divinity and spirituality in Van Gogh's life. This chapter identifies research gaps and highlights the relevance of the study.

The second chapter, "A Man of Words: Exploring Vincent van Gogh's Literary Persona and His Epistolary Expressions of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs," depicts Van Gogh as a literary person and a talented writer who expresses his spiritual views and thoughts through his letters. In his letters, Van Gogh expresses his viewpoints on a range of topics and his true personality. By analyzing the events in Van Gogh's letters, this chapter attempts to track all the significant stages of his life that deepened his connections with spirituality. This chapter not only portrays him as a great writer but also as a literary person who loves books. All the key pieces of evidence gathered from his letters throughout the chapter affirm the significance of religion and spirituality in Van Gogh's life.

The third chapter, "Religious Imageries in Vincent Van Gogh's Post-Impressionist Paintings," explores the importance of religious imageries in Van Gogh's paintings, which served as a way for him to express his deep spiritual contemplations. As a renowned Post-Impressionist artist, Van Gogh skillfully infused his artworks with symbolic meanings, vibrant colors, bold brushstrokes, and emotional compositions. The chapter examines how Post-Impressionism, with its focus on subjective expression and departure from traditional art norms, provided Van Gogh with an ideal platform to use

religious imagery as a potent tool for his spiritual exploration. The study highlights how Van Gogh seamlessly integrated divine themes into his works through religious imageries found in Christianity and Buddhism. Furthermore, it reveals the transformative impact of Buddhist principles on his art amidst his influential phase in Antwerp in 1885. Immersed in Japanese art, Van Gogh embraced Buddhist concepts, forging a deep spiritual connection. This influence is evident in his selected paintings and letters from 1885 to 1890. Through rigorous analysis of specific artworks, ranging from "The Potato Eaters" to "Tree Roots," the chapter highlights significant moments in Van Gogh's artistic journey. By applying Post-Impressionist theory to these paintings, the chapter also reveals the underlying religious and symbolic meanings.

The fourth chapter takes a unique perspective by depicting Van Gogh as an individual who harnessed art and religion as instruments to champion the cause of those in need. The chapter, "The Social Activist Embracing Spirituality: Vincent van Gogh's Artistic Portrayals of Women's Divine and Spiritual Essence," demonstrates how Van Gogh incorporated Christian religious imagery in his art to support women and the downtrodden in society, presenting him as a social activist. This chapter highlights Van Gogh's concerns for the oppressed in society, with a particular focus on peasant women and prostitutes who face double oppression. The research methodology employed for the selection of paintings involves a critical analysis of artworks featuring Christian religious themes and female subjects. The primary aim of this chapter is to illustrate how Van Gogh tried to find a place for women in both religion and society. It exemplifies how Van Gogh applied his divine and spiritual thoughts to assist people in need.

Chapter five, "Conclusion," summarizes the main ideas discussed in the other core chapters and establishes Vincent van Gogh as a person deeply devoted to the divine and spiritual aspects throughout his entire life. This final chapter summarizes how different chapters in the thesis explore Van Gogh's letters and artworks, which are filled with religious symbolism, to highlight Van Gogh's unwavering dedication to his religious and spiritual beliefs. Thus, this chapter concludes by restating the thesis statement that Van Gogh is a profoundly spiritual and religious individual, and faith has played a significant role in shaping both his life and creative expression. Furthermore, he has employed religious imagery in his works to utilize art as a medium for advocating social justice and equality.

In the sixth chapter titled "Recommendation," the scope for further research on this topic is explained. This chapter demonstrates that the analysis of Vincent van Gogh's artworks goes beyond a single theory, as his distinctive artistic style offers multiple avenues for interpretation. This chapter sheds light on future researchers' paths by recommending the scope for exploring Van Gogh's paintings from various theoretical perspectives, potentially situating him within different artistic eras or movements. Additionally, the thesis explores the influence of Japanese art on Van Gogh, challenging the notion of Western dominance and highlighting how Eastern artistic elements profoundly shaped his creative style. Thus, this chapter also shows how this unique case opens doors to broader investigations into the extensive influence of the East on the West across various domains, expanding future research horizons in this field.

In conclusion, this thesis focuses on the life and works of Vincent Willem van Gogh to show the rays of divine and spiritual elements in Van Gogh's life. It aims to

illustrate Vincent Van Gogh's transformation of the spirituality he embraced into religious imagery within his artworks, portraying him as an artist who employed these motifs to communicate with society. Through the examination of religious imagery in Van Gogh's paintings and letters, this thesis emphasizes the pivotal role of divinity and spirituality in his life.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The thesis titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh" delves into the life and creative compositions of Vincent van Gogh, providing a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the spiritual dimensions in his letters and paintings. The title encapsulates the profound significance of spirituality and divinity in Vincent van Gogh's life, showcasing how he intricately woven these profound themes into his correspondence and art. By exploring the religious imagery that permeates his work, this thesis investigates how van Gogh employed these symbolic elements to communicate his profound thoughts and beliefs to the world. In essence, it seeks to illuminate Vincent van Gogh as a deeply spiritual individual who ardently embraced and expressed his spirituality through his artistry, transcending into spirituality.

He is presented as a Post-Impressionist artist showcasing an individualist style and as a social activist following both Christian and Buddhist ideologies. He utilized spirituality to advocate for the needy in society, thus illustrating how Van Gogh applied his spiritual and religious ideologies in his art, using it as a medium to speak for the underprivileged. Exploring the Christian and Buddhist imageries in Vincent van Gogh's selected works, this thesis highlights how he bridged art and religion to share his opinions, express his views, and serve as a voice for the downtrodden. His letters are explored and analyzed as sources of his spiritual and artistic thoughts, as well as his general perspectives. The thesis also traces the multicultural influences on Van Gogh's

artistic and spiritual thoughts, leading him to believe that art and divinity pave the way to salvation, inspiration, and revolution.

Vincent Willem van Gogh (30 March 1853 – 29 July 1890) is a posthumously famous Post-Impressionist Dutch artist whose unique art profoundly influenced the 20th-century art period. He used vibrant colors and imagery filled with deep meanings and emotions in his paintings. Van Gogh was born in Groot-Zundert, Netherlands, to Theodorus van Gogh, a Calvinist pastor, and Anna Cornelia Carbentus. Van Gogh's mother was a moody artist like him. He was the eldest son in his family, having two brothers, Theo and Cor, and three younger sisters, Anna, Elizabeth, and Willemien. Among them, Theo van Gogh was the most well-known, as he was a confidant who supported Vincent van Gogh until his death. Theo Van Gogh embraced and accepted Vincent's true self with all his strengths and weaknesses.

The first time Vincent van Gogh came into contact with art was when he started his first job in The Hague. He left school at the age of 15 and began working as an assistant art dealer at his Uncle Cornelis' art dealership company, Goupil and Cie. Later, Theo also joined the same firm as an art dealer. Vincent van Gogh was a man with hopes. In 1873, he was transferred to Goupil Gallery's branch in London. Although he did not find his new job interesting, he believed that he could advance his career with it. He wrote that the London branch was essentially a stockroom and therefore very different from his job in The Hague (Letter 10). However, he was content with the fact that after work, he had time for himself to spend productively strolling, reading books, and writing letters. He found his living environment to be lovely, tranquil, and friendly (Letter 10), showcasing Van Gogh's adaptable nature.

When Van Gogh began his career in London, he was not yet an artist but rather an art dealer working for the Goupil firm. During his time in London, he had the opportunity to experience and understand English culture more deeply. Initially uninterested in English art, he later became fascinated by British art, especially the works of John Constable and Sir John Everett Millais, two artists who greatly influenced him. Van Gogh began sharing his opinions about English paintings with Theo as well. In a letter to Theo on 20th July 1873, Van Gogh wrote, “English art didn’t appeal to me much at first, one has to get used to it. There are some good painters here . . .” (Letter 11).

He arrived in London during a period of flourishing printing press technology, discovering numerous realistic and high-quality illustrations in books and journals. He was captivated by these mind-blowing visual depictions. He observed that British illustrators faithfully followed the words of English writers to create their illustrations. Van Gogh described these illustrations as realistic and resembling beautiful paintings.

His engagement with English culture deepened as he began reading works by English authors. He expressed his fondness for English authors in his letters, particularly for those whose works included detailed descriptions akin to paintings. In a letter dated 7th August 1873 to his distant relatives Carolina Adolphina van Stockum and her husband Willem Jacob van Stockum, Van Gogh wrote, “The last few days I’ve enjoyed reading the poems of John Keats; he’s a poet who isn’t very well known in Holland, I believe. He’s the favourite of the painters here, and that’s how I came to be reading him” (Letter 12).

He eagerly wrote about the English writers who inspired him in his letters. However, his admiration for Charles Dickens stood out above all others. For Van Gogh,

Charles Dickens was a great artist who painted with words. In letter 325, he made a special mention of Charles Dickens and his works. He believed that all of Dickens' works were exceptional, and some even surprised him. According to Van Gogh, no other author was a better painter or draughtsman than Charles Dickens.

His reading habits flourished during his time in London. He wasn't solely interested in English authors; he drew inspiration from a variety of books by different authors. His favorite reading material in London was Jules Michelet's *L'Amour*, a French writer whose work provided him insights into the concept of 'Woman'. For Van Gogh, books served not only as sources of leisure but also as tools for broadening perspectives and fostering open-mindedness. In letter 27, Van Gogh wrote to Theo expressing how *L'Amour* offered him a clear understanding of love and women. He noted that the work revealed the complexity of love, far beyond what most people realize. He likened the book to a gospel, a revelation that suggested a woman would not age as long as she loves and is loved. However, he found it challenging to comprehend women and their nature entirely.

This was also the period when he fell in love with his landlady's daughter, Eugenie Loyer. Her rejection shattered him. In a letter to Theo on 12 November 1881, Van Gogh expressed his sorrow about losing Eugenie Loyer: "I gave up on a girl and she married someone else, and I went far away from her and kept her in my thoughts anyway. Fatal" (Letter 183). This event contributed to his waning interest as an art dealer. Despite this, he was transferred to Paris by his firm in 1874. Even so, Van Gogh's affection for London remained evident, as expressed in his letter 39 written to Theo while he was in Paris. This letter reflects his ongoing fondness for both London and English art.

He started learning The Holy Bible when he came to Paris and began showing more interest in Christianity. Consequently, he decided to become a missionary like his father. Despite planning to change his career, his passion for paintings remained. He became greatly interested in the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn, the Dutch artist, and consistently shared his appreciation for these paintings through his letters.

After leaving London, Van Gogh lost interest in continuing his career as an art dealer. Once, he burst out and threw away all his books except the Bible, asking customers not to buy paintings from his firm. This incident showcased his lack of interest in his career as an art dealer and the emergence of a new interest in the path of God and becoming a missionary. Paris witnessed a completely different Van Gogh, someone deeply engrossed in reading literary works of various writers. However, his newfound love for religion made him focus solely on one book, The Holy Bible.

Van Gogh's aversion to continuing his career turned him into a failed art dealer who couldn't win over his customers. His employees also informed his parents about his failed career. Van Gogh visited his house in 1875 for Christmas, and his parents were deeply concerned about his job since they sensed his unhappiness. They wanted him to resign and find a job that would suit and satisfy him. However, before his father could ask him to resign, he was fired from the Goupil Firm for leaving the firm during the busiest time of business without prior permission from his employer. On 10th January 1876, Van Gogh wrote to Theo about his dismissal from the firm, "... His Hon. took the words out of my mouth, so to speak, saying that I would leave on 1 April, thanking the gentlemen for anything I might have learned in their firm" (Letter 65).

On 31st March 1876, Van Gogh left Paris and went to Etten. However, he wasn't interested in staying in Holland for long, so he found a job and moved to Ramsgate in mid-April 1876 to work as an assistant teacher at a boarding school. He worked there until July and then relocated to the outskirts of London, Isleworth, where he served as an assistant preacher and occasionally had the chance to deliver sermons. He saw this job as a stepping stone toward his dream career as a minister, expressing his excitement in a letter to Theo: "These couple of months have bound me so closely to the sphere ranging from schoolmaster to clergyman, both through satisfactions associated with those situations and through thorns that have pricked me, that I can no longer turn back" (Letter 85). He believed this job would pave the way for his future as a missionary. His desire to become a 'London Missionary' is evident in his letter 85 to Theo, showcasing his hope and future aspirations to assume this role when he reached the appropriate age. His words underscore his clear understanding of what a missionary should be. He wrote to Theo that becoming a missionary in London interested him, as missionaries were expected to interact with workers and the impoverished, spreading the word of God.

According to Van Gogh's understanding, missionaries in London were tasked with assisting foreign job seekers and aiding individuals facing difficulties. Thus, Van Gogh thought that he was well-suited for this missionary position, given his foreigner status, which enabled him to empathize with foreigners in need of assistance. His proficiency in multiple languages and his ability to connect with the lower classes and foreigners further boosted his confidence in becoming a missionary. However, he was still underage to become a missionary at that time, so he planned to wait one more year until he turned 24, the minimum age requirement to pursue his dream career.

He delivered his first sermon on 29 October 1876 at the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Richmond. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "Theo, your brother spoke for the first time in God's house last Sunday, in the place where it is written 'I will give peace in this place'" (Letter 96). In the same letter, he shared his decision that "wherever I go, I'll be preaching the gospel" (Letter 96).

When Van Gogh visited Etten to celebrate Christmas with his parents, they advised him to change his job. His father believed that Rev. Jones, his new employer, was exploiting his sincerity and hard work by treating him as an errand boy, deeming this unsuitable. Van Gogh also decided to seek a new job and, with his uncle Vincent's guidance, joined Pieter Kornelius Braat's bookstore in Dordrecht. He was content with this new job.

Nonetheless, he continued to study the Bible. He developed an interest in sermons and began attending more of them, drawing him closer to God. Consequently, he decided to become a minister. While his parents supported his decision, his father still worried about the success rate of his new career. Despite his confidence in his theological knowledge and interest, Van Gogh chose to enroll in a school to receive formal training in theology. His father pledged full support upon recognizing Van Gogh's determination, prompting him to join the Flemish training college for evangelists in Brussels. He chose a college in Brussels due to the shorter course duration compared to the six years required in Holland. At this Flemish school, Van Gogh learned that exceptional trainees could be appointed as evangelists even before completing their studies, based on their suitability for the position.

The Flemish college requested Van Gogh to undergo a three-month training period before officially joining the course. Rev. Jones, whom he worked with in England, also played a role in helping Van Gogh secure a position at the Flemish School. Unfortunately, Van Gogh couldn't sustain his studies at the Flemish college for long. He left to work as an evangelist in a coal miners' village, driven by his desire to aid impoverished workers. During his time in England, he had attempted to work in a coal mining village, but his application had been rejected due to his age, an incident he mentioned in his letter 148.

Van Gogh believed that those who toiled in darkness, like the miners deep within coal mines, were the ones most in need of the gospel's message. Hence, he left the Flemish college after a three-month training period and pursued an evangelist position in a small Belgian coal-mining village named Borinage. He communicated this plan to Theo in letter 148, and soon after, he commenced his work as an evangelist in Borinage, dedicating himself to helping impoverished coal miners. Nevertheless, his orthodox Christian beliefs caused friction with church authorities, leading to his dismissal.

From correspondence between him, his parents, and Theo, it becomes evident that Van Gogh ceased contacting them for a period while he was in Borinage. A letter from Mr. Van Gogh to Theo dated 5th July 1880 reflects his excitement upon receiving a letter from Van Gogh. His parents, concerned about his behavior and job situation, continued to send him money. In his letter to Theo, Van Gogh acknowledged the gap in their communication, indicating a strain in their relationship. Van Gogh wrote, "It's with some reluctance that I write to you, not having done so for so long, and that for many a reason. Up to a certain point you've become a stranger to me, and I too am one to you, perhaps more than you think; perhaps it would be better for us not to go on this way" (Letter 155). He also admitted

that he was writing to Theo after learning that Theo had sent him some money. In the same letter, he expressed his reluctance and melancholy, explaining his struggles and lack of success in his Borinage life (Letter 154).

Although dismissed by the church and advised by his father to return to Etten, Van Gogh chose to remain in Borinage while rekindling his passion for painting and reading. In his first letter after this extended gap in June 1880, letter 155, Van Gogh informed Theo of his decision to stay in Borinage. He believed that nurturing interests in art and literature would help him discern his true calling.

With Theo's support, Van Gogh embarked on his art career in 1880. While in Borinage, he began sketching and reproducing artworks. Theo sent him renowned drawings to practice and learn from. In letter 156, addressed to Theo, Van Gogh's enthusiasm for drawing was palpable. He wrote, "You should know that I'm sketching large drawings after Millet, and that I've done The four times of the day, as well as The sower. . . I'm writing to you while drawing and I'm in a hurry to get back to it . . ." (Letter 156). He was fully immersed in art, spending most of his time drawing. He also mentioned completing Millet's *Labours of the fields*, particularly *The Woodcutter*. Van Gogh wrote, "I'll tell you, then, that I've sketched *the 10 sheets of Millet's Labours of the fields* . . . I've completely finished one of them, namely The woodcutter . . . I first wanted to do Bague's Exercices au fusain . . . and now I've finished the 60 sheets" (Letter 157).

Despite suboptimal results, he persisted in his artistic efforts. On September 24, 1880, Van Gogh conveyed to Theo, "You can see, then, that I'm working like mad, but for the moment it isn't giving very heartening results. But I have hopes that these thorns will bear white flowers in their time, and that this apparently sterile struggle is nothing other

than a labour of giving birth. First pain, then joy afterwards” (Letter 158), reflecting his determination to achieve success in his artistic career.

In 1880, Van Gogh visited Brussels to enhance his knowledge of art. He believed that understanding the principles of light and shadow was crucial for drawing, and he considered Brussels a hub for acquiring this essential knowledge and improving his drawing skills. Additionally, he sought a mentor who could provide practical guidance. He turned to Mr. Tobias Victor Schmidt, the manager of Goupil and Cie in Brussels, to help him find an artist willing to guide him.

Despite his shift to an art career, Van Gogh's primary aim remained aiding the impoverished. To him, being both an evangelist and an artist were means to convey divine and spiritual messages to those in need. Pursuing formal art education was a way to secure a salaried job, as he saw it as a pathway to achieving his ultimate goal. He articulated this intention in a letter to Theo:

I'm writing to you from Brussels . . . But my goal must, for the moment at least, remain to learn as quickly as possible to do presentable and saleable drawings, so that I'll begin to earn an income directly through my work. Because such indeed is the necessity that is imposed upon me . . . Once I am master of my pencil or of watercolour or of etching, I can return to the region of the miners or weavers, to do things better from life than thus far. But first I must acquire a modicum of skill. (Letter 159)

Following Theo's advice, Van Gogh sought guidance from the Dutch artist Willem Roelofs on how to proceed. Roelofs recommended joining a drawing academy to acquire

formal art training. While hesitant initially, Van Gogh embraced the idea, recognizing that a formal education was crucial to realizing his dream career.

Van Gogh joined the 'Drawing from Antiquity: Torso and Fragments' course at the Royal Academy of Arts, Brussels. He wrote nothing about his experience at the Art Academy in his letters, and some art historians, like Jan Hulsker, suspected Van Gogh's attendance for the course. However, it is clear that he registered for the course as he participated in the art exhibition held at this academy on 5th December 1880. During his time in Brussels, Van Gogh's letters expressed how he was progressing with his artwork. He wrote to Theo that he was doing "...quite well with my work, although it's still imperfect and must improve a lot" (Letter 163). Throughout this period, Theo took care of Van Gogh's expenses, covering all living expenses, including those for his art models.

Later, Van Gogh dropped his course in Brussels and decided to join Anthon van Rappard, the Dutch artist, to study and work in his studio. Initially, Van Gogh did not have a good impression of Anthon van Rappard, but over time, they became close friends. In 53 letters, Van Gogh mentioned Rappard, especially in the letters to Theo. They traveled and worked together in Holland, with their complex relationship lasting from 1881 to 1885. Both artists shared many common experiences, particularly their struggles in their careers and the challenge of selling their artworks.

Van Gogh spent his time in Etten improving his drawings. In May, in a letter to Theo, he mentioned that Rappard was planning to visit him in Etten, illustrating their growing relationship. By the end of June 1881, Van Gogh wrote to Theo about his experience and the influence Rappard had on him during their time together in Etten.

During his time in Etten, Van Gogh fell in love with his widowed cousin, Kee Voss-Stricker. He expressed his love for her, as they felt comfortable with each other. However, her recent widowhood and the emotional toll it took on her made her reject his advances, leading Van Gogh into a state of depression. Van Gogh was aware of the complexities and sensitivities of her situation. Despite her vehement rejection, he believed in the sincerity of love, emphasizing the importance of genuine commitment without greediness. Responding to Theo's letter, Van Gogh eloquently expressed his emotions, detailing his love for Kee without ulterior motives.

Following Kee's persistent rejections, Van Gogh was compelled to give up on pursuing her. His father, citing Van Gogh's refusal to attend church, forced him to leave home. While his father's primary concern was his religious nonconformity, Van Gogh suspected that his relationship with Kee was also a factor in his father's anger. In a letter to Theo dated 29th December 1881, Van Gogh discussed his parents' reaction to his relationship with Kee and his rejection of the church. This incident highlighted Van Gogh's detachment from the authority of the church. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

At Christmas I had a rather violent argument with Pa, and feelings ran so high that Pa said it would be better if I left home. Well, it was said so decidedly that I actually left the same day. Things actually came to a head because I did not go to church, and also said that if going to church was something forced and I *had* to go to church, I'd most certainly never go again, not even out of politeness, as I've been doing fairly regularly the whole time I've been in Etten. But oh, there's actually much more to it,

including the whole story of what happened this summer between me and K.V. (Letter 194)

As the year came to a close, Van Gogh went to The Hague to work with Anton Mauve. In a letter to Rappard, he mentioned his plan to work with Mauve, stating, "...Mauve will be going to Princenhage for a day, and after that coming here for a day... And if Mauve is here, I'll go where Mauve goes... Mauve gave me encouragement recently when I needed it. He's a man of genius" (Letter 176). However, due to his unstable behavior, disagreements arose between them, leading Mauve to dismiss him.

Mauve, however, blames Van Gogh for labeling himself as an artist and told him that he had a "vicious character" (Letter 224), which left Van Gogh sadder than parting with Mauve. Van Gogh recounted this incident in a letter to Theo, ". . . he said, 'you have a vicious character'. At that point I turned around – it was in the dunes – and walked home alone. Mauve blames me for saying, I'm an artist – which I won't take back, . . ." (Letter 224). Van Gogh's anger and frustration regarding this statement were reflected in his words to Theo, revealing another facet of his character and shedding light on his subsided depressive state of mind. Van Gogh wrote, "I do have ears, Theo – if someone says 'you have a vicious character', what should I do? I turned around and went back alone, but with great sorrow in my heart because Mauve dared to say that to me. *I* won't ask him to explain such a thing to me, nor will I apologize" (Letter 224). However, by the time he wanted to reconcile with Mauve, it was too late. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "I told Tersteeg that I very much wished to be on good terms with Mauve once more, but he did not give me so much as a word in reply" (Letter 356).

Following these conflicts with Mauve, Van Gogh initiated a relationship with Clasina Maria Hornik, also known as Sien, an abandoned pregnant prostitute. Despite Theo being the sole supporter of Van Gogh's expenses, Van Gogh took Sien and her five-year-old child under his protection and began living with them. She posed as a model for his paintings, and he compensated her. For him, being with Sien was not solely about using her as a model; it also meant caring for Sien and her child in every possible way. He even informed Theo that Sien captured his attention primarily due to her illness. Although he was no longer a missionary, he aspired to emulate the principles of a true missionary, aiding and safeguarding the less fortunate.

Van Gogh believed that it was his responsibility to look after Sien and felt that it was the duty of all compassionate individuals to assist someone like her. He also believed that he and Sien could make a perfect team, mutually supporting each other. However, his emotions for Kee still lingered, yet he concluded that waiting for her would yield no results, and safeguarding Sien took precedence over his unreciprocated affection. He opted not for selfishness but to act as a benevolent human being. Given that he wasn't earning at that point, he felt uncertain whether he would continue receiving the same level of support from Theo as before. Van Gogh sought reassurance from Theo about his willingness to take on double responsibility by providing assistance not only to Van Gogh but also to Sien and her child.

Van Gogh took on the role of supporting Sien and embracing her problems as his own. Thus, following her delivery, he brought Sien to his house. He held the belief that for a woman to be with a single man was often not feasible, but if she managed to discover the right person to love and be loved by, she could find happiness within herself. Observing

the confidence and serenity in Sien's eyes when she was with him filled him with joy, reinforcing his belief that he could aid her in uncovering her concealed happiness. The woman burdened by sorrow transformed into a passionate angel.

Upon realizing the depth of their relationship, Van Gogh devised a plan to marry Sien, offering her lifelong protection and care. He even discussed his matrimonial intentions with Theo, expressing his desire to secure his father's consent following a conversation with Theo. He corresponded with his father, requesting permission to marry Sien, yet no response was received from either his father or Theo. Consequently, Van Gogh penned another letter to Theo, seeking his viewpoint on the matter. He appended that he viewed it as his duty to wed and safeguard her from returning to a life on the streets, rather than allowing her to endure a harsh existence with her children. Van Gogh's perception of marriage differed; he saw it as a twofold commitment to mutually support and cherish each other, accompanied by love and happiness. He was convinced that their relationship fulfilled these criteria, as long as they aided one another without remorse.

During the period he spent living with Sien, a significant portion of Van Gogh's artworks centered around her. This marked a productive phase in his artistic career, characterized by optimism. During this time, he had the chance to pursue his passion, experience love, and be loved. He produced approximately two hundred works, mainly consisting of Dutch landscapes and depictions of Sien. The portraits of Sien illuminated the struggles of oppressed women in society. Unfortunately, their relationship was short-lived; the pressure exerted by both families compelled Van Gogh to part ways with Sien. Even Sien's mother was opposed to their relationship, and Van Gogh believed that Sien was unsafe within her own family. Consequently, although he was contemplating leaving

Sien, he remained concerned about her future. However, he deemed separation as the only viable option to garner his family's support for his artistic career's continuation. As a result, he devised a plan to travel to Drenthe to paint.

Van Gogh was resolute about his plans and the decisions he made. In the autumn of 1883, Van Gogh left Sien and went to Drenthe. He was in a melancholic state when he left Sien, and this melancholy persisted even during his time in Drenthe. Therefore, leaving Sien was not as easy as he had anticipated, which subsequently plunged him back into the clutches of depression.

From Drenthe, he wrote to Theo, “All this keeping me *very hard up* all the time — to put it *mildly*. Add to this that singular torture... loneliness, and you really will no longer be *able* to think that there’s any possibility of my feeling ‘flush’ for the time being — or that I felt it then” (Letter 408). For him, the sole source of strength and hope was Theo’s letters. They provided him with solace and confidence to forge ahead. Consequently, when Theo's correspondence dwindled, Van Gogh became greatly concerned. “Be aware of this, though, brother, that I’m absolutely cut off from the outside world — except for you — so that for me it was enough to make me crazy when your letter did not come at a moment when, far from being ‘flush’, I was in dire straits” (Letter 408).

In his efforts to overcome his depressive state, Van Gogh left Drenthe for Nuenen, deciding to stay with his parents who resided there. However, Van Gogh felt unwelcome in his own home. He perceived himself akin to a stray dog wandering the premises. Although his father allowed him entry, Van Gogh believed he was not truly accepted within the household. According to him, his father had failed to fulfill the duties of a true father, contributing to his sense of estrangement.

Van Gogh's letter to Theo, dated December 15th, 1883, vividly portrayed his depressive state and his sense of unfulfilled dreams. His mood oscillated between aggression and tranquility, a manifestation of his bipolar tendencies. This duality shed light on the forthcoming years of his struggles with traumatic disorders. His letters alternated between aggressive and calm tones, reflecting his shifting emotional states. In moments of depression, he often dwelled on sources of sadness, such as Kee or Sien, attributing their losses to his family. In a letter written on December 28th, 1883, Van Gogh angrily criticized Theo for the dark fate that befell Sien and her children, attributing this to Theo's decisions and their impact on their lives.

Despite grappling with periods of depression, he aspired to advance his artistic career. Thus, he conceived a plan to establish an art studio within the laundry area of his home and dedicated himself to painting. However, his affection for another woman, Margot Begemann, who lived adjacent to his house, complicated matters. Van Gogh's mother hosted a sewing class at their residence, and when she sustained a leg injury, Margot took charge of the class. It was during this time that Van Gogh and Margot developed romantic feelings for each other. Eventually, they decided to marry, but both families opposed the union, leading Margot to attempt suicide. He wrote to Theo, "Miss Begemann has taken poison — in a moment of despair, when she'd spoken to her family and people spoke ill of her and me, and she became so upset that she did it, in my view, in a moment of definite mania (Letter 456). This incident deeply disturbed Van Gogh.

Tragedies struck Van Gogh brutally back-to-back. After Margot's incident, he was trying to force himself into a normal life. But the sudden death of his father gave him another shock. His father died of a stroke on the evening of 26th March 1885. Van Gogh

sent a telegram to his brother Theo, who was in Paris at that time, conveying the message of their father's death. Van Gogh's letters right after his father's demise show how he was attempting to motivate himself and broaden his mind to accept the reality that was happening around him. He was striving to anchor himself to reality, embracing the incidents that had befallen him. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "Life isn't long for anyone, and the question is just — to do something with it" (Letter 489). He began focusing more on his artwork.

Van Gogh felt that his hard work started paying off when his paintings began receiving recognition in Paris. However, affording his painting supplies and models became unmanageable. This made him worried. But the Nuenen period was pivotal in his artistic career. He painted his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters*, during this time. Staying in Nuenen helped Van Gogh understand the inner souls of the potato eaters. So, Van Gogh decided to paint *The Potato Eaters* in April 1885. He wrote to Theo, "Anyway — I plan to make a start this week on that thing with the peasants around a dish of potatoes in the evening, or — perhaps I'll make daylight of it, or both, or — 'neither one' — you'll say. But should it succeed or should it fail, I'm going to start on the studies for the different figures" (Letter 490). He commenced working on the figures in *The Potato Eaters*.

Van Gogh worked diligently on the painting, *The Potato Eaters*, aiming to render it perfect in all aspects by capturing the warmth and emotions of the peasant workers. He aimed to depict their laborious lives, shackled by poverty, and the humility they faced. He was highly confident about his painting, and he firmly believed that *The Potato Eaters* was a unique masterpiece. This not only demonstrated his confidence but also indirectly labeled

the painting as a masterpiece created by him. He employed earthy and muted colors in *The Potato Eaters* to portray the challenges they encountered in their lives and work.

For Van Gogh, a peasant girl held more beauty than a civilized lady due to her rustic appearance. He desired his paintings to exude the sweat and blood of the real characters he depicted. Thus, *The Potato Eaters* not only portrayed the lives of potato eaters but also reflected the essence of their souls embedded within it. Consequently, he approached this painting earnestly and perceived the lives of these potato eaters as a novel unexplored world to civilized society.

Later, he resolved to relocate from Nuenen to Antwerp in search of inspiration and to experiment with new techniques. Van Gogh became intrigued by the works of the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens, leading him to adopt a lighter palette akin to Rubens. When he moved to Antwerp in 1885, he became captivated by the beauty of Japanese art. He recognized the influence and impact of Oriental art on the Western world. Van Gogh communicated his newfound interest in Japanese prints to Theo. He wrote, “I’d like to do some pen drawings, but colored in flat tints like Japanese prints” (Letter 614). Japanese prints served as a wellspring of inspiration for him to refine his ideas. He wrote to Theo, “I’ll put some Japanese prints on the wall” (Letter 602). His fascination with collecting Japanese prints spurred him to delve deeper into Japanese painting techniques. He wrote, “... I’d like to do drawings in the style of Japanese prints” (Letter 594). Whenever he found himself inspired by certain Japanese prints, he aspired to replicate the concept in his own paintings. “. . . I could make little paintings like Japanese prints out of all these drawings” (Letter 606). Van Gogh wrote, “Look, we love Japanese painting, we’ve experienced its influence — all the Impressionists have that in common — and we wouldn’t go to Japan,

in other words, to what is the equivalent of Japan, the south [of France]? So I believe that the future of the new art still lies in the south after all” (Letter 620).

Van Gogh relocated to Paris suddenly in February 1886. During his time in Paris, he had the opportunity to learn about the Impressionists and experience their artistic techniques. He wrote to Theo, “In Antwerp I did not even know what the Impressionists were, now I have seen them and though *not* being one of the club, yet I have much admired certain Impressionist pictures – degas, nude figure – Claude Monet, landscape” (Letter 569). Thus, he believed that Paris offered him greater artistic opportunities than Antwerp. Inspired by Impressionist art, Van Gogh swiftly transitioned to the Impressionist palette, opting for lighter colors once again. He also believed that aligning his work with the Impressionist style would enhance his art's marketability, given its rapid growth at the time. He conveyed his thoughts on adopting Impressionist art to Theo, stating, “If we dare believe, and I’m sure of it, that Impressionist paintings will go up in value, we’ve got to do lots of them and keep the prices up” (Letter 602).

When Van Gogh arrived in Paris, Theo remained in Nuenen, resulting in their continued correspondence through letters. Following their father's passing, Van Gogh became deeply concerned about their mother's well-being. He expressed to Theo that Theo's marriage would bring joy to their mother. While Van Gogh desired to see Theo married, he himself was not inclined towards marriage. Despite grappling with loneliness and enduring a series of failed relationships, Van Gogh conveyed his melancholic feelings to Theo, depicting himself as unsuitable for marriage. His troubled thoughts led him to feel inadequate both in relationships and in his artistic pursuits.

Van Gogh's plan to journey to Arles in the south of France aimed to explore a broader range of light color tones. He reached Arles in February. However, living in Arles proved costly. He anticipated that staying in the southern region would provide an environment reminiscent of Japanese art, which he admired. Van Gogh identified with Japanese artists who painted boldly and swiftly, akin to his own style. During his two years in Arles, he produced over two hundred paintings. His exposure to Japanese prints led him to study Buddhism, reflecting in his later artworks where he emulated Japanese artistic styles and incorporated Buddhist imagery.

The friendship between French artist Paul Gauguin and Van Gogh flourished during their time in Arles. They mutually encouraged each other. Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh, requesting, "A word of encouragement in response if possible" (Letter 581). Van Gogh shared his desire to alleviate the isolation he felt in Arles by having a roommate, with Gauguin being his primary choice. He believed that their shared artistic interests could create an environment conducive to collaboration and progress in their careers. He expressed this notion to Theo, saying, "I'm fairly sure that we could count on Gauguin's staying with us for good, and that there'll be no loss on either side. But by joining together in this way, we'll each of us be more ourselves, and unity will bring strength", he mentioned to Theo (Letter 694). Consequently, he invited Gauguin to join him in his Yellow House in Arles, where he aimed to establish a unique space infused with artistic value through his paintings.

Paul Gauguin expressed his willingness to live with Van Gogh, and they began living together in the Yellow House in October 1888. Those were days of hope and excitement for Van Gogh, as he was eager to share and exchange artistic ideas and

collaborate with Gauguin. This marked one of the most thrilling artistic periods in Van Gogh's life. Van Gogh adorned the Yellow House with his sunflower paintings, which later became included among his masterpieces.

For a while, Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin supported each other, with Van Gogh stating, "Gauguin gives me courage to imagine, and the things of the imagination do indeed take on a more mysterious character" (Letter 719). However, soon after, due to differences in opinions and disputes regarding their artistic approaches, their relationship deteriorated. He expressed his concerns about Gauguin to Theo, "I myself think that Gauguin had become a little disheartened by the good town of Arles, by the little Yellow House where we work, and above all by me" (Letter 724). This strained relationship with Gauguin exacerbated Van Gogh's depression, leading to the manifestation of symptoms of mental illness. His deteriorating relationship with Gauguin culminated in a violent act in December when he severed a portion of his own ear. He then wrapped his ear lobe in a newspaper and presented it as a gift to Rachel, a prostitute, entrusting her to keep it safe for him.

Following this disturbing incident, Gauguin became fearful and left Van Gogh. Van Gogh was subsequently hospitalized for several days. Despite Van Gogh's persistent pleas, Gauguin chose not to visit him again, leaving Van Gogh in a distressing state. After his discharge from the hospital, Van Gogh promptly wrote to Gauguin, expressing his earnest sincerity. He awaited Gauguin's response, penning, "I'm taking advantage of my first trip out of the hospital to write you a few most sincere and profound words of friendship. I have thought of you a great deal in the hospital, and even in the midst of fever and relative

weakness . . . I wish you prosperity in Paris . . . Please reply” (Letter 730). Van Gogh wrote to Theo and mentioned Gauguin’s decision to stay away from him.

In 1889, considering his illness, Van Gogh himself volunteered at the asylum of Saint-Paul-de-Mausole in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to stay there for some time. Van Gogh started accepting the fact that mental illness is just a disease like any other. He also believed that to return to the normal stage of his life and career, he needed treatment and recovery from his mental illness. Van Gogh’s words to Theo were,

I really must make up my mind, it’s only too true that an awful lot of painters go mad, it’s a life which makes you very distracted, to say the least. If I throw myself fully into work again, that’s good, but I still remain cracked. If I could enlist for 5 years I would recover considerably and would be more rational and more the master of myself (Letter 768).

In response to Van Gogh's letter mentioning his decision to be admitted to the asylum, Theo wrote to Van Gogh and advised him not to feel bad about it but rather to see it as a good rest so that he could return stronger. Theo wrote,“. . . I do not consider your going to St-Rémy as a retreat, as you say, but simply as a momentary rest so as to come back soon with new strength” (Letter 770). So on 8th May 1889, he was admitted to the asylum, a decision he never regretted. He believed that with the change in his surroundings, he would be able to concentrate more on his career and regain his passion for painting, creating more artworks. Thus, this year was considered the most crucial year in his life as an artist.

During this Saint-Rémy period, he spent most of his time painting, using it as a self-imposed therapy to distract himself from other thoughts and stay calm. Most of the

paintings he created during this time were inspired by the view from his windows at St-Rémy asylum. He tried to absorb the nature around him, creating his own artistic space. He sent most of his paintings to Theo and mentioned his painting inspirations in his letters. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, “One is the countryside that I glimpse from the window of my bedroom. In the foreground a field of wheat, ravaged and knocked to the ground after a storm. A boundary wall and beyond, grey foliage of a few olive trees, huts and hills. Finally, at the top of the painting a large white and grey cloud swamped by the azure (Letter 779).

During the Saint-Rémy period, Van Gogh painted his most famous masterpiece of all time, *The Starry Night*. Even though he created many landscape paintings, *The Starry Night* remains the most important and famous among people. The idea for this painting sprouted from the morning view Van Gogh had – the big morning star he saw through the asylum window. He 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” (Letter 777). He painted this based on the far-sighted countryside view he usually saw from his asylum window. Moreover, he infused his emotions and memories into the painting, making it a legendary artwork.

Dr. Peyron, the main doctor at the asylum, never considered Van Gogh mad; instead, he thought that Van Gogh was epileptic. So he suggested that Van Gogh move to a new place with a different environment, where he would get more exposure to continue with his artwork. When Theo discussed Dr. Peyron’s conclusion about Van Gogh with the French artist friend Camille Jacob Pissarro, he recommended the Psychiatry doctor Paul-Ferdinand Gachet Sr. in Auvers-sur-Oise for Van Gogh. Camille Jacob Pissarro told Theo

that Van Gogh could stay with Dr. Paul Gachet and continue his treatment and artwork. Dr. Paul Gachet, a painter by profession, was happy to take over Van Gogh's treatment and was also excited to encourage Van Gogh to continue painting.

After Van Gogh left the St-Rémy asylum in May 1890, Dr. Gachet played an important role in Van Gogh's life, taking care of him in the last few months of his life. His painting of Dr. Gachet is very famous, showcasing not only his artistic skills but also his ability to study a character, revealing how deeply Van Gogh was able to understand and connect with him. With Dr. Paul Gachet's care and treatment, Van Gogh recovered and returned to his normal life. Meanwhile, with the assistance of Theo, ten of Van Gogh's paintings began to feature at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris and Les XX in Brussels in 1890. His paintings started to receive recognition among art critics of that time, and one of his works was sold during the exhibition, marking the only painting that was sold during his lifetime.

However, the happiness was short-lived. Van Gogh's persistent thoughts of being a burden to his brother Theo haunted him intensely. He wrote letters to Theo but avoided discussing his artworks. In one of the last remaining letters he wrote to Van Gogh, Theo expressed his concern over this matter, saying, "I hope, my dear Vincent, that your health is good, and as you said that you're writing with difficulty and do not speak to me about your work, I'm a little afraid that there's something that's bothering you or that isn't going right" (Letter 901). Van Gogh's struggle with himself was resurfacing. In his final existing letter, he expressed to Theo that he had lost the desire to share his emotions with him, viewing such sharing as futile, revealing his inclination to withdraw from life. This shift in behavior ultimately led to his enigmatic death on July 29, 1890. Van Gogh sustained a

gunshot wound to his chest on July 27, 1890, in a field near Auvers, just two days prior to his demise. Theo was by his side as he passed away. However, interpretations of the gunshot wound vary. While some researchers argued it was a suicide attempt, others claimed that two boys playing with a gun accidentally shot Van Gogh. Despite his kind nature, Van Gogh refrained from disclosing the boys' identities. Yet, many believed that Van Gogh was at a point where he genuinely wanted to end his life, favoring the notion of suicide over an unforeseen accident.

To many, Van Gogh might be perceived as a mad artist who spent his life in various asylums. However, he endured significant challenges to establish himself as a respected artist. Van Gogh was a self-taught artist without any formal art training, yet his works consistently exhibited remarkable beauty and conveyed profound situational meanings and emotions. He existed as an outcast during the artistic period of his time, and his talent went unrecognized in his lifetime.

This thesis aims to analyze Van Gogh's letters and artworks to demonstrate the impact of spirituality and divinity on his life and career. As such, relevant books, articles, and research journals that focus on Van Gogh's life and artworks are employed for the literature review. These works are examined to ascertain whether divinity and spirituality influenced his life and career, aiming to underscore the importance of this research and address gaps in previous studies.

Even though Irving Stone's *Lust for Life*, published in 1934, is a fictionalized biography, it is often commended for its detailed research, capturing the artist's struggles with mental health, poverty, and relentless pursuit of artistic expression. It explores the life and struggles of van Gogh, capturing his passion for art and the challenges he faced in his

personal and professional life. So, it is referred to get a complete picture of Vincent van Gogh's life and works.

Tracing Van Gogh's artistic journey reveals that he initially came into contact with the art world while working as an art dealer in his uncle's firm, Goupil and Cie. However, it was only after he relinquished his position as an Evangelist in Borinage that he embarked on his career as an artist. Despite his artistic career spanning a decade, he managed to sell only one painting during his lifetime. *The Essential: Vincent Van Gogh* by Ingrid Schaffner (1998) delves into the enigmatic tales surrounding Van Gogh's life and career, shedding light on the Impressionist movement and his distinct approach to painting. Schaffner uncovers Van Gogh's arduous journey, asserting that he toiled tirelessly to achieve a successful artistic career even posthumously.

His unwavering passion for art drove him to become an artist. A close examination of Van Gogh's life and works reveals that his journey was far from easy. *Van Gogh: The Life* (2012) by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith elucidates the challenges Van Gogh confronted in his life and his profound bond with Theo. He grappled with various stages of depression and harrowing circumstances. His unrequited love affairs and his relationship with Sien compounded his depression. Despite numerous artistic setbacks, it was Theo's steadfast support that enabled Van Gogh to persevere in his artistic pursuit. Through their exploration of Van Gogh's life, Naifeh and Smith uncover the role spirituality played in his journey, highlighting his unwavering faith in God until his death.

While Van Gogh adhered to Christianity, he was also influenced by Buddhist ideologies. As Japanese printmaking began to impact his artistic output, Van Gogh endeavored to infuse his own interpretation of Japanese aesthetics and his utopian vision

of a so-called primitive society into his art. This admiration for Japanese prints prompted his exploration of Buddhism. During his time with Paul Gauguin in Arles, both artists delved into Buddhist teachings. The spiritual tenets of Buddhism left an imprint on Van Gogh. In a letter written by Gauguin after Van Gogh's death, Gauguin mused, "To die at this time is a great happiness for him, for it puts an end to his suffering, and if he returns in another life, he will harvest the fruits of his fine conduct in the world, according to the law of the Buddha" ("In Light of Asia"). *Van Gogh and Japan* (2018), authored by a group including Louis van Tilborgh, Nienke Bakker, Cornelia Homburg, Tsukasa Kōdera, and Chris Uhlenbeck, examines the impact of Japanese prints on Van Gogh's work. However, while delving into his use of Japanese art style, the book falls short in discussing the influence of Buddhism on Van Gogh.

In 1886, he relocated to Paris alongside his brother Theo. Van Gogh became captivated by the Impressionists and their techniques, eventually befriending Danish-French Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist artist Camille Pissarro. Pissarro's influence brought Van Gogh closer to Impressionism. Van Gogh perceived art as a means to symbolically express his ideas. Consequently, he began to explore new artistic techniques that would allow him to convey his spiritual thoughts through his art. Studies on Post-Impressionism illuminate how its proponents, including Van Gogh, placed emphasis on religious imagery and spirituality in their artworks. Artists who embraced unique and individualistic styles, like Van Gogh, aligned with Post-Impressionism, as pointed out by art historian John Rewald in his book *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin* (1956). Van Gogh harnessed art as a channel for expressing his emotions, attitudes, and spiritual perspectives.

Following his departure from the Church, many scholars argued that Van Gogh rejected God. However, he maintained a strong connection to divinity and spirituality, opposing the authoritative power of the church. Even after resigning from his role as an evangelist, divinity remained integral to Van Gogh's life and art. Drawing from the selected literature, this thesis endeavors to establish the significance of divinity and spirituality in Van Gogh's life and career.

The influence of spirituality is evident in his religious calling and his artwork, establishing him as both a painter-evangelist and a person deeply committed to his faith. This illustrates the profound connection between Van Gogh and religion, as explored in *The Ministry of Vincent van Gogh in Religion and Art* (2012), edited by Kenneth L. Vaux. Van Gogh's spiritual journey played a pivotal role in shaping his unique artistic vision. Contrary to the assumptions of many art critics who believed that Van Gogh abandoned his religious convictions upon leaving the Christian ministry to pursue an artistic career, Kathleen Powers Erickson argued otherwise in *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* (1998). Erickson traced Van Gogh's evolution from his early religious upbringing through his missionary service and his eventual reconciliation of traditional Christian beliefs with contemporary viewpoints, debunking the notion of abandonment. The tormented artist discovered a path to spiritual unity with God through solace in nature.

Van Gogh's conversion experience in his early twenties was born out of a profound yearning for ultimate truths, reflecting a spiritual quest rather than an obsession or failed romantic pursuit. Analysis of Van Gogh's interest in Japanese prints reveals that his understanding of life aligns with the perpetual flux of Zen Buddhism. He emerges as an unconventional theologian and a dedicated seeker of universal spirituality, as articulated in

Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest (1989) by Cliff Edwards. Furthermore, Jean Leymarie, in his work *Van Gogh* (1986), traces the artistic and spiritual evolution of Van Gogh through an analysis of his sketches, paintings, and letters.

Van Gogh wasn't solely an artist; he was also a skilled writer. In addition to his native Dutch, he was fluent in French, German, and English. His letters showcased his writing prowess, characterized by the potent language he employed, the clarity of his handwriting, his adeptness at adjusting his tone according to the recipient, the vivid metaphors he employed, and his expression of spiritual thoughts. The "Van Gogh as a Letter-Writer" study on the Van Gogh Museum website underscores these qualities. Among his 903 extant letters, 820 were addressed to friends and family, while he received 83 replies. This thesis undertakes an analysis of all his letters.

Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, Theo's wife, played a significant role in preserving the memory of the legendary Van Gogh. His letters offer fresh insights into his personality, shaped by his unwavering faith, the influence of his family, and his genuine concern for humanity. The letters offer glimpses into his life, religious beliefs, conflicts with God and others, and how he channeled his struggles into his artwork. They unveil captivating insights into his spiritual thoughts, corroborated by Dr. William J. Havlicek's *Van Gogh's Untold Journey* (2010).

Van Gogh's letters possess a remarkable literary depth. Beyond their expressive force, they provide astute commentary on universal human concerns, while also offering a revealing self-portrait of the artist. He employed his letters to convey his creative and spiritual musings, illustrating the evolution of his views on religion, ethics, and the purpose of art. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (2014) by Patrick Grant reflects

this perspective on Van Gogh's letters. Essential themes recurring in Van Gogh's letters encompass pain, religion, love, imagination, and the ineffable, as suggested by Patrick Grant in *Reading Vincent van Gogh: A Thematic Guide to the Letters* (2016).

The letters provide glimpses into different developmental stages in Van Gogh's life, showcasing his epistolary talents. His letters range from conventional to deeply personal, revealing how they served as a medium for him to share his emotions, thoughts, and ideas with loved ones—particularly illuminating his relationship with his brother Theo. They shed light on his passion for literature and how it contributed to his personal growth and evolving worldview. These insights are affirmed by the "Van Gogh as a Letter-Writer" study conducted by the Van Gogh Museum.

Van Gogh's letters also exhibit a surprising breadth of literary knowledge. His familiarity extended beyond classical and ancient authors to encompass modern literature from French, German, English, American, and Russian sources. Despite his lack of formal education, Van Gogh was fluent in three languages apart from Dutch, his mother tongue. He wrote to Rappard, "Look, I have an almost complete French edition of the works of Dickens, translated under the guidance of Dickens himself," highlighting his extensive literary exposure (Brodskaja 351). These letters offer profound insights into his life, as underscored by Patrick Grant in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* (2014).

This thesis contributes to the existing findings on Van Gogh by presenting him not only as a remarkable artist but also by analyzing his role as a writer who conveyed his spiritual thoughts and perspectives through his letters. As a result, it underscores the importance of divinity and spirituality in Van Gogh's life.

Prior research on Van Gogh primarily centered on his life and artistic output. These studies depicted Van Gogh through the lens of depression and trauma, portraying him as an artist who spent his entire life in various asylums and sought validation from the world. Most research on Van Gogh focused solely on his artistic and religious aspects. However, this thesis explores the lesser-known facets of Van Gogh's life and work, presenting him not only as an artist but also as a Post-Impressionist artist and accomplished writer who utilized his art and correspondence to convey his spiritual ideas. The thesis depicts Van Gogh as a social activist who incorporated Christian religious imagery into his artworks to advocate for marginalized women. The research delves into how Van Gogh employed his art to raise awareness about prevailing societal issues, adopting a unique perspective that highlights the positive aspects of his life, portraying him as a hopeful individual and a determined fighter seeking redemption through his spiritual connection to art. Consequently, the thesis underscores the role of divinity and spirituality in both Van Gogh's life and creations.

The thesis titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh" is divided into six chapters. The research methodology employed in the thesis is textual analysis. Textual analysis involves a systematic examination of written and visual materials to discern patterns, themes, and meanings. The primary sources include Van Gogh's letters, which provide insights into his thoughts and emotions, and selected paintings that serve as visual representations of his spiritual exploration. The thesis adheres to the structure outlined in the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) Handbook, 9th edition.

The first chapter "Introduction" gives a big picture of Vincent Van Gogh's life and works. It explains the title of the thesis, the research methodology, and the literature review. The chapter also gives short summaries of all the chapters in the thesis. Through biographical details explained in this chapter, it shows how important God and spirituality were in Van Gogh's life and how it influenced his art. This chapter pinpoints areas in existing research that require further exploration, thus revealing the research gap, and underscores the significance of the current study. It sets the stage for the rest of the thesis to delve deeper into Van Gogh and his creative journey.

The second chapter, "A Man of Words: Exploring Vincent van Gogh's Literary Persona and His Epistolary Expressions of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs," analyzes Van Gogh's letters to present him as an exceptional writer who utilized his correspondence to express spiritual concepts. This chapter employs textual analysis to examine Van Gogh's letters, emphasizing his literary abilities and the expression of spiritual concepts through his writings. The methodology involves a close reading of the letters to uncover the nuances of his spiritual beliefs. The textual analysis enables the identification of recurring themes and the development of Van Gogh's spiritual narrative through his epistolary expressions. It establishes him not just as a gifted artist but also as a proficient writer. His letters reveal his spirituality and divinity, emphasizing the role of spirituality in his life. Thus, establishing him as a literary individual who articulated thoughts, emotions, and ideas through his writings.

Following the portrayal of Van Gogh as a man of letters, the third chapter explores his evolution from an evangelist to an artist. Titled "Religious Imageries in Vincent Van Gogh's Post-Impressionist Paintings" this chapter delves into the profound

significance of religious motifs in Van Gogh's art. These motifs served as conduits for his deep-rooted spiritual and divine reflections. As an eminent Post-Impressionist artist, Van Gogh skillfully infused his paintings with symbolic meanings, using vibrant colors, bold brushwork, and emotive compositions to convey his innermost thoughts and beliefs. Thus, utilizing textual analysis, this chapter explores the profound significance of religious motifs in Van Gogh's paintings. The methodology involves a detailed examination of selected artworks from 1885 to 1890, spanning his transformative period in Antwerp. The analysis combines Post-Impressionist theory with interpretations of Christian and Buddhist religious imageries, showcasing the seamless integration of diverse spiritual elements into his art. The chapter also illustrates how Post-Impressionism, with its emphasis on subjective expression and departure from conventional artistic norms, provided Van Gogh with an ideal platform to utilize religious imageries as potent conveyors of his spiritual exploration. It underscores the seamless incorporation of divine themes into his art, presenting him as a distinctive Post-Impressionist artist who drew inspiration from diverse religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism, to enrich his artistic vision. The chapter uncovers the transformative impact of Buddhist principles on Van Gogh's art during his influential period in Antwerp in 1885. Immersed in Japanese art, Van Gogh adopted Buddhist concepts, fostering a profound connection with spiritual elements. Selected paintings from 1885 to 1890 provide evidence of this profound influence, corroborated by his personal letters. So, these artworks undergo meticulous analysis, spanning from his early masterpiece *The Potato Eaters* to his final work *Tree Roots*, illustrating pivotal moments

in his artistic journey and showcasing the influence of Christianity and Buddhism on his life.

Applying Post-Impressionist theory to these works, the chapter, “Religious Imageries in Vincent Van Gogh’s Post-Impressionist Paintings”, unveils the underlying religious and symbolic meanings interwoven into his art, simultaneously celebrating Van Gogh's unique artistic elements, structures, individual style, and forms. Ultimately, this exploration enhances our understanding of Van Gogh's creative brilliance as he employed religious imageries to communicate his spiritual and divine thoughts, leaving an enduring impact on the art world as an exceptional Post-Impressionist artist who transcended conventional boundaries to convey the essence of his innermost spiritual experiences through his evocative and emotionally charged masterpieces.

The fourth chapter casts Van Gogh as a social activist. Titled “The Social Activist Embracing Spirituality: Vincent van Gogh’s Artistic Portrayals of Women’s Divine and Spiritual Essence”, this chapter scrutinizes selected paintings to demonstrate how Van Gogh integrated his religious and spiritual ideologies into his art, employing religious imagery to articulate his views and advocate for marginalized individuals. This chapter highlights how Vincent van Gogh employed his artistic prowess to champion the cause of the underprivileged, with a specific focus on peasant women and prostitutes. The paintings featuring women and Christian religious imageries are meticulously selected, and the methodology involves a critical analysis of these paintings, thus highlighting Van Gogh's role as a social activist through his artistic expressions. The chapter illustrates how Van Gogh provided a voice for women in society through his art. Hence, the selected paintings are subjected to textual analysis to illustrate how Van Gogh integrated

his religious and spiritual ideologies into his art, advocating for marginalized individuals, particularly peasant women and prostitutes.

The fifth chapter, "Recommendations," discusses potential avenues for future research and study, providing suggestions for scholars interested in further exploring the intersection of spirituality, art, and social activism in Vincent van Gogh's works.

The concluding chapter, "Conclusion", synthesizes the findings from the textual analysis, presenting novel insights into the religious imageries in Van Gogh's letters and paintings. It summarizes key observations and contributions to the understanding of Van Gogh's creative brilliance and his unique ability to convey spiritual and divine thoughts through his art.

In summary, all the chapters within the thesis are intricately interconnected to explore the role of divinity and spirituality in Vincent van Gogh's life and artistic contributions. These chapters analyze pivotal events in Van Gogh's life, culminating in a comprehensive research study that portrays him as an inspiring artist, social activist, and visionary who communicated his spiritual thoughts and perspectives through both his art and letters. This thesis offers a fresh perspective on Van Gogh, revealing a facet of hope and inspiration within him, rooted in his unwavering belief in God and spirituality.

Chapter II

A Man of Words: Exploring Van Gogh's Literary Persona and His Epistolary Expressions of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs

Vincent van Gogh is consistently praised for his meaningful and symbolic paintings. However, it was his letters that breathed life into his existence and creations. His letters served as outlets for sharing his emotions and experiences during the production of his artworks, as well as for expressing his views and opinions about the world at large. These letters, particularly those written to his brother Theo, trace Van Gogh's growth as both an individual and an artist. Beyond his paintings, the letters delved into various topics such as religion, love, death, sickness, and creativity – subjects that resonate with universal human interests. Through his letters, he conveyed his perspectives and potent words, effectively captivating his audience through his creative use of language. In the article titled "The Letters of Van Gogh: The Love of Books," it is observed that Van Gogh “. . . was an enthusiastic letter-writer and sent frequent and detailed letters to his brother Theo, detailing his work, life, the weather, artwork he'd seen, and books he was reading” (Lashbrook). The Museum of Dutch Literature's 2010 acknowledgment positioned Vincent van Gogh among the top hundred deceased writers, further attesting to his literary significance. Thus, this chapter undertakes an analysis of Vincent van Gogh's letters to present him as not only a gifted reader but also a talented writer whose letters mirror the divine and spiritual sparks within his life. His letters stand as tangible proof of the spiritual and transcendent aspects he embraced. This chapter also narrates his concern for the impoverished and how his spiritual teachings guided his

efforts to assist them, thereby illustrating the centrality of divinity and spirituality in his life.

Johanna Gezina van Gogh-Bonger, Theo's wife, came into possession of the letters Van Gogh had written to Theo. Van Gogh embarked on his letter-writing journey at the age of 19. Recognizing the significance of these extraordinary correspondences as a record of Vincent's aspirations and struggles as an artist, Jo compiled a three-volume collection of letters to Theo in 1914.

Among the known 903 letters of Van Gogh, 820 were penned by Van Gogh himself, and he received 83 letters. Within this collection, 651 letters were addressed to his brother Theo van Gogh, while seven were directed to Theo and his wife, Jo. Of the 83 letters he received, 39 were from Theo, and two were jointly from Theo and Jo. However, Van Gogh did not preserve the letters he received from Theo as diligently as Theo did, resulting in only 39 of Theo's letters being extant. Apart from his brother, Van Gogh maintained correspondence with his younger sister Willemien as well, penning 21 letters to her. Additionally, three more letters were sent to Willemien and their mother together, especially after he fell ill.

From his inaugural letter to his final one penned in 1890, Van Gogh painted a vivid picture of his life, work, opinions, and thoughts. The first published letter from Van Gogh to Theo was composed on September 29th, 1872, during his time in Hague. This letter was a response to Theo's communication, where Van Gogh conveyed his affection for his absent brother.

It is likely that Van Gogh authored more letters than the surviving collection suggests, with several letters lost over time. Van Gogh's preferred writing material was a

single sheet of paper folded into four sections. This practice has yielded 1200 surviving sheets, amounting to a total of 3800 pages of letters. Of these, 585 letters were written in his native language, Dutch, while he composed 310 in French and six in English. During his time in Borinage, he wrote only a limited number of letters in French; however, by 1888, he began penning more letters in French to Theo, interspersing them with Dutch idioms and expressions.

While his letters predominantly delved into his personal sphere, those addressed to fellow artists who shared common ideals often focused on his artistic career. To the Dutch painter Anthon van Rappard, he wrote 58 letters, receiving only one in return. He penned 22 letters to the French Post-Impressionist artist Emile Bernard and four to his cherished friend and fellow artist Paul Gauguin. Correspondingly, he received 16 letters from Paul Gauguin. Patrick Grant noted in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* that “a small number of letters are addressed to other artists, such as John Peter Russell, Paul Signac, and Eugène Boch, as well as to further assorted recipients such as Albert Aurier, M. and Mme Ginoux, and J. J. Isaäcson, among others” (8). These letters not only chart his artistic evolution but also reveal his personal growth, offering a comprehensive portrayal.

Van Gogh's letters bore distinct tones and language that were tailored to each recipient, showcasing his mastery of language. He skillfully adjusted his tone and language in correspondence, reflecting the intimacy and connection he shared with each individual. For instance, he adopted a different tone while addressing his beloved brother Theo, allowing his emotions and sentiments to flow freely. Conversely, his communication with his artist friend Émile Bernard adopted a professional and scholarly

tone. As Patrick Grant elucidated in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study*, Van Gogh's interactions with different individuals varied, Van Gogh ". . . is solicitous and often kind to Wil, racy and unbuttoned with Bernard, and academic and theoretical with Van Rappard; with Theo, he expresses a spectrum of emotions of Dostoevskian range and variety" (8).

Van Gogh's letters were profoundly personal, penned exclusively for private purposes. The imperfections and perfections manifest in his letters offer insights into the writer's mental state and reflections. Both his letters and artworks exhibit confessional qualities, connecting through shared human interests.

Examining the letters he wrote in his earlier years, it becomes evident that they were meticulously composed, with minimal corrections. After 1875, however, he seemed less concerned with neatness and prioritized expressing himself more authentically. His handwriting remained clear and legible, but the tumultuous thoughts and emotions were apparent in the crossed-out words and phrases within his letters. To emphasize strong sentiments, he resorted to bold underlines and occasionally capitalized words. Margins and interstitial spaces accommodated his afterthoughts, tracing the evolution of his ideas. Deliberately or not, he often disregarded conventional language rules, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Patrick Grant's *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh: A Critical Study* expounded on how Van Gogh's language mirrored his thoughts. Patrick Grant wrote, Van Gogh's language,

For instance, when his seizures recurred in the St. Rémy hospital, Van Gogh wrote a brief, pained letter in black crayon (797/6:70). There are several crossings out, words are bent at the end of a line to fit them in,

both the right and left margins contain inserts written vertically, and at the heart of the letter, the words “it is ABOMINABLE” (“c’est ABOMINABLE”) are offset and emphasized in a way that commands our attention visually. There is a wide space between the lines above and below, and the word “ABOMINABLE” is in bold capital letters with a heavy, double underlining in black crayon and with only two other words in the line. It is impossible to read the original without feeling Van Gogh’s anguish, which is communicated by the appearance of the letter. (12)

Van Gogh's passion for books led him into the realm of writing and improving his writing skills. Books also played a pivotal role in Van Gogh's development of spiritual thoughts and religious ideas. Patrick Grant affirmed this in his book, *Reading Vincent van Gogh: A Thematic Guide to the Letters*, stating, “Van Gogh sees art and literature as also mainly supportive of his religious values . . . during his period of religious enthusiasm, he cited the Bible frequently and was an avid reader of religious classics by authors such as Thomas à Kempis and John Bunyan” (13 – 14). Proficient in three languages—English, Dutch, and French—Van Gogh frequently mentioned the latest books he had read in his letters to Theo. His mastery of multiple languages vividly demonstrated his knowledge and keen interest in reading. Consequently, reading played a pivotal role in Van Gogh's writing, language development, and the shaping of his religious and spiritual beliefs. As Van Gogh put it, “one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live” (Letter 155).

Van Gogh's fervor for books was akin to a sacred and holy pursuit. In June 1880, he wrote to Theo, expressing that his love for literature was as sacred as Rembrandt's art.

He contended that both books and paintings complemented each other (Letter 155).

Within the same letter, he confessed to possessing an insatiable craving for literature, an incessant need to study and hone his intellect, much like his need for sustenance. To him, books held a significance akin to daily sustenance. This ardor for books partly contributed to his prowess as a writer. As he conveyed to Theo,

I have a more or less irresistible passion for books, and I have a need continually to educate myself, to study, if you like, precisely as I need to eat my bread . . .

When I was in different surroundings, in surroundings of paintings and works of art, you will know that I then took a violent passion for those surroundings that went as far as enthusiasm. And I do not repent it, and now, far from the country again, I often feel homesick for the country of paintings. (Letter 155)

He exhibited a profound interest in books spanning various genres, particularly novels. Abigail Lashbrook, in *The Letters of Van Gogh: The Love of Books*, noted, “Although Vincent enjoyed reading just about anything, from the Bible to philosophy to the classics, he particularly enjoyed a good novel, and some favorite authors of his were Dickens, Hugo, Shakespeare, Zola, and Eliot”. Among these authors, Émile Zola and Charles Dickens were his favorites and he admired them for their descriptive writing styles. In his letter to Theo, written on 26th July 1882, he confessed that he was enthralled by Zola's writings, and he loved how Charles Dickens expressed his perspective through his books. He added that he was also impressed by *Edwin Drood* (Letters 238 and 251).

For him, nurturing a passion for both books and paintings served as a coping mechanism to combat loneliness and depression. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

So instead of giving way to despair, I took the way of active melancholy as long as I had strength for activity, or in other words, I preferred the melancholy that hopes and aspires and searches to the one that despairs, mournful and stagnant. So I studied the books I had to hand rather seriously . . . But on the road that I'm on I must continue; if I do nothing, if I do not study, if I do not keep on trying, then I'm lost, then woe betide me. That's how I see this, to keep on, keep on, that's what's needed.

(Letter 155)

Thus, reading helped him to develop his writing skills.

Van Gogh believed that there was a connection between "good writing and good paintings" (Grant 14). Therefore, books were as important to him as paintings. He thought that good writing would help him express his ideas clearly, much like his paintings. Through his letters, he demonstrated that good painters can also be good writers. In February 1883, Van Gogh wrote, "books and reality and art are the same kind of thing for me" (Letter 312). He even encouraged his artist friend, Émile Bernard, to write more poems, emphasizing the importance of words as much as colors. Van Gogh believed that artists and authors employed similar techniques in creating their works. For him, artists painted with colors, while writers painted with words. He also believed that writers and painters mutually inspired each other. Writers could find inspiration in meaningful paintings, just as artists could be influenced by descriptive and inspirational writings. For instance, Van Gogh likened Charles Dickens to a painter, as he felt that Dickens's writings were akin to drawings that vividly portrayed his ideas. In letter 325, written to Anthon Van Rappard from The Hague on March 5th, 1883, Van Gogh stated,

“In my view, there’s no other writer who’s as much a painter and draughtsman as Dickens. He’s one of those whose characters are resurrections”. Similarly, Van Gogh compared Shakespeare's mastery of the English language to a highly skilled artist's use of their brush. Van Gogh wrote, “Shakespeare – who is as mysterious as he? – his language and his way of doing things are surely the equal of any brush trembling with fever and emotion. But one has to learn to read, as one has to learn to see and learn to live” (Letter 155).

In letter 155, which Van Gogh wrote to Theo, he compared novelists to painters, asserting that they evoke similar emotions in their audiences. Van Gogh found elements of Rembrandt in Shakespeare, saw similarities between Michelet's work and Correggio or Sarto, identified Victor Hugo with Delacroix, and believed that Beecher Stowe exhibited traits of Ary Scheffer. He also noted that Bunyan's work could be likened to M. Maris or Millet, as both possessed exceptional qualities and a clear expressive ability. According to Van Gogh, Rembrandt's works could even stand alongside the Gospels.

As an avid reader, he was drawn to the alphabet as much as he was to colors, which contributed to nurturing the writer within him. Van Gogh believed that both artists and writers conveyed their ideas clearly and beautifully. His letters demonstrate how he infused his spiritual ideas into his correspondence, similar to how he infused his artworks with colors.

Thus, the chapter aims to present Van Gogh as not only a great painter but also as a skilled writer, showcasing through his letters his embrace of divinity and spirituality throughout his life. He consistently kept the spark of spirituality close to him, using it to fortify his hopes and aspirations for the future. Van Gogh's trust in God helped him face

life's challenges; he wrote to Theo, "It is indeed good that a voice speaks to us from the Bible, strengthening us with words like 'Let not your heart be troubled', 'have faith in God'" (Letter 136). This chapter portrays Van Gogh as a remarkable artist wearing the mantle of a writer with profound spiritual thoughts. Therefore, it analyzes Van Gogh's letters, revealing the glimmers of divinity and spirituality within him.

Christianity, Van Gogh's early religion, formed the basis of his spirituality. As noted by Judy Sund in her book *Van Gogh: A & I (Art and Ideas)*, Van Gogh held a unique perception of Christ, envisioning Christ as a poet. His favorite parts of the Bible were Christ's parables. He admired how these parables could portray contemporary reality while carrying deeper metaphorical meanings. He found it intriguing that everyday elements could allude to grander concepts and the divine. For example, the Sower paintings referred to the sower parable from the Bible, where Van Gogh viewed the world as the field and the growing wheat as the embodiment of righteousness. Van Gogh believed that portraits were the most expressive form of art, even though his landscape paintings might have represented his spiritual expression most profoundly to his audience. He found God more present in fellow humans than in the natural world. Van Gogh believed that comfort and solace preceded judgment and condemnation, and he saw Christ as the ultimate consoler, focusing on those who were physically and spiritually wounded. These ideas were eloquently articulated in several of his letters. His passion to spread this message led him to contemplate becoming a preacher like his father.

His letters consistently reveal his deep devotion to God. Upon moving to Paris, he dedicated more time to studying The Holy Bible, finding solace in God's embrace. "Let

us also pray that we may become rich in God” (Letter 49), Van Gogh wrote to Theo. His letters from Paris began to reflect his thoughts about God, hinting at a potential future as a missionary. In a letter dated July 6th, 1875, to Theo on Goupil letterhead from Paris, he mentioned his newfound interest in Bible paintings, stating, “I want to tell you which prints I have on the wall. . . . Reading the Bible (a large, old Dutch room, (in the evening, a candle on the table) in which a young mother sits beside her child’s cradle reading the Bible” (Letter 37). In another letter on July 15th, 1875, Van Gogh expressed his intention to send Theo a French Bible and *L’imitation de Jesus Christ* (Letter 38), indicating his growing fascination with both painting and learning from the Bible.

Van Gogh's belief in the inherent presence of God within everyone led him to keep the essence of God close to his heart. He wrote to Theo, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: the kingdom of God is within you” (Letter 51). Letter 51 underscores Van Gogh's enduring desire to walk with God. He expressed, “Those who walk with God, God’s friends, God’s pious followers, those who worship Him in Spirit and in Truth, have been proved and tried, and have oft-times received from God a thorn in the flesh; blessed will we be when we can repeat after our father . . .” (Letter 51). This longing to be united with God grew stronger, prompting him to attend church regularly. He shared his enthusiasm for hearing sermons with Theo and encouraged his brother to visit churches frequently. Van Gogh wrote,

On Sunday last and Sunday a fortnight ago I went to Mr Mercier’ church and heard him speak on ‘all things work together for good to them that love God’(in Dutch it says ‘for those who love God all things will work together for good’) and on ‘He created man in his own image’, it was

glorious and grand. You should also go to church every Sunday if you can, even if it isn't so very beautiful; do that, you won't regret it. (Letter 40)

Van Gogh's life in Paris was different, and it was the first time he started showing interest in following his father's path, embracing religion and religious institutions. In letter 47, he mentioned his love for religion. He longed to immerse himself in religion through prayers and with the help of the Bible. He also mentioned the stirring sermon he heard one day on the subject of letting go of the past, which included the advice of keeping up one's hope, regardless of what he faces in his life, but to keep faith in Jesus Christ. This was a message he embraced passionately until his death.

Van Gogh started liking The Holy Bible more than any other book. He even asked Theo to get rid of all books except the Bible. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "Read no more Michelet or any other book (except the Bible) until we've seen each other again at Christmas . . ." (Letter 46). In letter 50, he added, "I'm going to get rid of all my books by Michelet &c. &c., you should too". He believed that concentrating on the Bible would give him more peace. So, Van Gogh advised Theo to throw away all his books, saying, "I advised you to get rid of your books, and I still advise you to do so, certainly, just do it; it will give you peace" (Letter 56).

Van Gogh's love for God was clearly visible in his letters, especially those written to Theo. Van Gogh always encouraged Theo ". . . to pray that we may become rich in God" (Letter 49). Van Gogh added, ". . . let us believe that God will give good gifts, a part that shall not be taken away, to those who pray to Him for it. And let us trust in God with all our heart and lean not unto our own understanding" (Letter 50).

Even though Van Gogh changed his job to become a bookkeeper, he always learned from the Bible. Whenever he had time, he used to go to church to hear sermons, and each sermon took him closer to the Bible and God. He wrote to Theo, “The first Sunday I was here I heard a sermon on ‘Behold, I make all things new’, and in the evening ‘Now we see through a glass, darkly . . . This morning I went to hear the Rev. Beversen in a small old church, it was the Lord’s Supper . . .” (Letter 101). He kept mentioning the sermons he heard and the messages he got from them through his letters to Theo until he resigned from this job in April 1877. He spent most of his nights learning from the Bible. Thus, working in Dordrecht gave him a clear vision of his life and how to steer in that direction. Van Gogh understood his thirst for learning more about spirituality and religion, and he decided to become a minister. Van Gogh’s words to Theo, “God can work in a person so that he can write and deliver thousands of sermons – that is something good and worthwhile – and I hope that that will be my portion . . .” (Letter 136). But he always wanted to become a missionary who helps the poor. So, he decided to work for the needy.

The religious imagery used in the letters shows how Van Gogh helped the poor people with his spirituality. He observed the importance of spirituality in religion, rather than following the firm and oppressive rules of religion. Van Gogh believed that there is a relationship between work and prayer. As Patrick Grant mentioned in *Reading Vincent van Gogh: A Thematic Guide to the Letters*, “Van Gogh’s early Christian belief was based on a traditional acceptance of divine providence and was practiced in a spirit emphasizing the close connection between work and prayer” (16). In his early years, Van Gogh thought that only religious faith could help suffering people. So, he tried to connect

his work with prayer and decided to become an evangelist in the coal-mining village of Borinage. He wrote to Theo,

You surely know that one of the root or fundamental truths, not only of the gospel but of the entire Bible, is ‘the light that dawns in the darkness’.

From darkness to Light. Well then, who will most certainly need it, who will have an ear to hear it? Experience has taught us that those who work in darkness, in the heart of the earth like the mine-workers in the black coal-mines, among others, are very moved by the message of the gospel and also believe it. In the south of Belgium, . . . there is a region called the Borinage, where there is one of those populations of labourers who work in the many coal-mines . . . The Borins . . . do nothing but mine coal.

(Letter 148)

Van Gogh’s letters show that in Borinage, he was working for these poor coal miners with selfless love. He easily connected with the villagers and was able to create a bond with them. He forged a unique path of his own, different from the common evangelists, which made him famous among the Borins. He followed the traditional way of saints, the true path shown by Jesus Christ. He started living with the villagers, adopting their lifestyle and leaving his comfortable life behind. To him, being an evangelist meant understanding the lives of these impoverished people and praying and working for them. In his letter to Theo, Van Gogh mentioned his hope of becoming the “Man of Sorrows” (Letter 149), like Jesus. He aspired to master the skills of Jesus to help those in distress and dire need. Van Gogh wished to convey God’s message, especially to the lower-class

community. Thus, he was a constant support for the poor and ill. In his letter to Theo, Van Gogh wrote,

How Jesus Christ is the Master who can strengthen, comfort and enlighten a man like the Macedonian, a workman and labourer who has a hard life. Because He himself is the great Man of Sorrows, who knows our diseases, who himself is called the carpenter's son, even though He was the Son of God and the great physician of sick souls. Who worked for 30 years in a humble carpenter's workshop to carry out God's will; and God wants man to live and walk humbly upon the earth, in imitation of Christ, minding not high things, but condescending to men of low estate, learning from the gospel to be meek and lowly in heart. I've already had the opportunity to visit a few sick people, for many people here are ill. (Letter 149)

As mentioned in the explanatory notes accompanying Van Gogh's letters, which are published on the Van Gogh Museum website, after starting to work in Borinage, Van Gogh rarely wrote letters to Theo, his family, and his friends ("The Letters"). Hence, the last surviving letter available is from "between about 11 and 14 August 1879" ("The Letters"). The next letter found was "between about 22 and 24 June 1880" ("The Letters"). As a result, the events during his time in Borinage are little known from his own letters. However, his life in Borinage is explored through studies conducted by other writers and researchers on Van Gogh.

As noted in Patrick Grant's book *Reading Vincent van Gogh: A Thematic Guide to the Letters*, ". . . in the Borinage another note began to sound, as Van Gogh turned his attention to the "many people" there who were ill. His experience among the miners did

much to shift his focus away from the orthodox beliefs of his youth and towards a more direct concern with the dire social conditions of the poor” (17). Confirming Van Gogh’s efforts for the poor, in the book *Vincent van Gogh*, Victoria Charles mentioned that Vicar Bonte, who worked in Van Gogh's neighborhood, reported that Van Gogh led a life of sacrifice and suffering different from other missionaries. Vicar Bonte also mentioned that Van Gogh always worked hard for the sick, poor, and needy. Hence, Van Gogh’s life resembled the hardships of Jesus Christ's life. Victoria Charles wrote,

He felt obliged to imitate the early Christians, to sacrifice all he could live without, and he wanted to be even more destitute than the majority of the miners to whom he preached the Gospel. I must add that also his Dutch cleanliness was singularly abandoned; soap was banished as a wicked luxury; and when our evangelist was not wholly covered with a layer of coal dust, his face was usually dirtier than that of the miners. [...] He no longer felt any inducement to care for his own well-being – his heart had been aroused by the sight of others’ want. He preferred to go to the unfortunate, the wounded, the sick, and always stayed with them a long time; he was willing to make any sacrifice to relieve their sufferings. (102)

Van Gogh realized that the spiritual assistance was more important to the Borinage miners than evangelism. He always embraced the importance of divine and spiritual elements in life, but before his time in Borinage, these were subordinate to religion. For instance, he believed that he could address the problems of Borinage only with the help of religion. He wrote to Theo, “There is evil in the world and in ourselves, terrible things, and one doesn’t have to have gone far in life to dread much and to feel the

need for unfaltering hope in a life after this one, and to know that without faith in a God one cannot live – cannot endure” (Letter 117). In this instance, religion supplants the spiritual life. However, later he understood that moral values and spiritual elements should be combined to address the problems of Borins, rather than relying solely on religion. Confirming this, Patrick Grant wrote, “Instead of religion, the moral problems of poverty and oppression took precedence and he believed that he could help the poor people with his spirituality rather than just depending on religion” (*Reading Vincent van Gogh* 14). He accepted that his moral and spiritual values, along with his belief in divine elements, would enable him to fight the prevailing social conditions in Borinage. Van Gogh believed it was morally wrong to live in luxury while ministering to impoverished coal miners in Belgium, as he had chosen Christ's path to serve the underprivileged. Hence, he started living like the poor Borins, without any luxuries.

This caused tension within the church, and Van Gogh became a threat to the established rules of the church. His appointment in Borinage was temporary and supposed to be renewed after the probationary period. However, after an inspection by church authorities, they found that Van Gogh's methods deviated significantly from the general church rules. Despite warnings from the church, Van Gogh continued to help and empathize with the villagers. Consequently, the church authorities were dissatisfied with his performance and dismissed him. In *Vincent van Gogh*, Victoria Charles wrote, “In January 1879, he found a temporary post that might have been renewed, had an inspector of the Comité d'Évangélisation not discovered that the new preacher took the Bible more literally than the authorities of the church” (102). Even though Van Gogh was removed

from the evangelist position, his attraction to elements of divinity and spirituality remained intact.

After Van Gogh's dismissal from Borinage, he moved to Etten to live with his parents. He began reading Jules Michelet's books on free-thinking. However, reconciling his belief in the supreme power of God with disbelief in traditional religious rules proved challenging. He struggled to detach the concept of divinity from conventional religious beliefs and link divinity with spirituality. He even sought different ways to define and address God. Many scholars of the time accused him of atheism due to his rejection of orthodox religion. However, he consistently believed in the power of God.

Van Gogh's primary goal was to highlight the importance of spirituality in religion. While he maintained his trust in the Bible, he believed in the idea of spirituality and recognized the significance of embedding spirituality in religion as something "new all the more" (Letter 574). He held onto past Christian ideas and ideologies, yet he wanted to embrace a new approach to religion that integrated spirituality. He thought that a spiritual perspective within religion would direct people toward the future instead of dwelling on the past, in contrast to the rigid tenets of conventional religion. He wrote to his sister Willemien van Gogh,

For my part, I'm always glad that I've read the Bible better than many people nowadays, just because it gives me a certain peace that there have been such lofty ideas in the past. But precisely because I think the old is good, I find the new all the more so. All the more so because we can take action ourselves in our own age, and both the past and the future affect us only indirectly" (Letter 574).

According to his viewpoint, religion had been built upon rules and restrictions, while spirituality offered a way to understand oneself first, leading to discovering divine elements within the cosmos and nature. Through spirituality, Van Gogh focused on his present state rather than dwelling on his past life, reflecting his optimistic attitude toward life.

Evidently, Van Gogh's letters demonstrate that he was never against Christ. As he mentioned in his letter 294 addressed to Theo about his belief in God, "One of the things that will not pass is the something on high and belief in God, even if the forms change, a change as necessary as the renewal of greenery in the spring". However, he rejected religious institutions when he found that they excluded those who followed the right path of Jesus. He believed that the clergymen working under these institutions were oppressive and conservative, resisting new ideas. Consequently, Van Gogh chose to distance himself from the established church, a decision that influenced the rest of his life.

Following his experience in Borinage, he began to question his father's conventional religious ideals. Van Gogh shifted his focus from religion to morality and spirituality, which he believed to be the core components of acceptable religious beliefs. Therefore, Van Gogh argued that his father had misconstrued Christ's fundamental moral teachings of love.

He increasingly embraced the spirit of spirituality, which was new to him and distinct from traditional religion. Even though he distanced himself from traditional religion, he continued to be in awe of the universe's complexity and to accept the existence of a higher power. This confirms that he believed in God and spirituality. While

analyzing his letters, it becomes apparent that after rejecting the oppressive power of religion, Van Gogh began using vague terms to allude to the supreme power, rather than relying on religious terminology. As Patrick Grant noted,

That is, in order to go beyond the traditional God question and to describe a spiritual dimension that is “above,” Van Gogh resorts to a range of suggestive but vague terms (“infinite,” “Unnameable,” “it,” the “je ne sais quoi,” and so on). This language is intended not so much to be evasive as to evoke the felt sense of a transcendent value, which Van Gogh thought was communicated by great art and which he describes simply as “mysterious” and “magical”. (*Reading Vincent van Gogh* 150)

Van Gogh consistently believed in the existence of God. His experiences in the Hague, Drenthe, and Nuenen led him to perceive that people adhering strictly to religious rules were “bourgeois, hypocritical, and oppressive, in contrast to the freedom of love, which he saw as the real truth preached by Christ” (19), as explained by Patrick Grant in his book *Reading Vincent van Gogh: A Thematic Guide to the Letters*. He made it clear that belief in God did not necessitate listening to sermons or following the oppressive regulations of religious institutions. Instead, for him, trusting in God meant embracing the path of spirituality. Therefore, he believed that an undeniable connection existed between love and God. He believed that God would guide people toward love and vice versa. In letter 187, Van Gogh mentioned to Theo, “God wants the world to be reformed by reforming morals, by renewing the light and the fire of eternal love”. Hence, for Van Gogh, believing in God meant immersing oneself in spiritual elements existing in society, such as love. Even though Van Gogh experienced the pain of unrequited love, he loved

people and viewed love as a powerful force inherent in everyone, enabling individuals to connect with the outside world, learn its secrets, and unite with it spiritually. This unwavering faith in God's existence is evident. Van Gogh was appalled by the organized Christian religion's approach to love, as he believed that God intended people to transform the world through moral reform and by igniting the enduring flame of eternal love.

Van Gogh wrote to Theo, elucidating the relationship between love and God,

. . . I consider it absolutely essential to believe in God in order to be able to love. To believe in God – by that I mean (not that you should believe all those petty sermons of the ministers and the arguments and Jesuitry of the prudish, the sanctimonious, the strait-laced, far from it) — to believe in God, by that I mean feeling that there is a God, not a dead or stuffed God, but a living one who pushes us with irresistible force in the direction of ‘Love on’. That’s what I think. Proof of His presence – the reality of love. Proof of the reality of the feeling of that great power of love deep within us – the existence of God. Because there is a God there is love; because there is love there is a God. Although this may seem like an argument that goes round in a circle, nevertheless it’s true, because ‘that circle’ actually contains all things, and one can’t help, even if one wanted to, being in that circle oneself. (Letter 189)

The growing divide between Van Gogh and the Church authorities led him to seek out other Christians who shared his disillusionment with the Church. Van Gogh came to believe that the Church had undermined the social and moral foundation of

Western culture. He openly criticized the Church for its oppressive and dubious principles. Van Gogh believed that restoring religious sensibilities rooted in humanistic principles, which discouraged blind adherence to religious dogmas and rituals, was crucial. He advocated that all religions contained timeless truths and were essential for the salvation of Western civilization.

Books played a significant role in shaping Van Gogh's spirituality, fostering free-thinking and philosophical thoughts. *Sartor Resartus*, a philosophical novel by English philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle, greatly impacted Van Gogh. It helped him discard outdated religious beliefs and embrace new spiritual ideas that would serve his religious needs. The spiritual writings of Leo Tolstoy also influenced Van Gogh. He was intrigued by Tolstoy's perspectives on renunciation, and he rejected constraining and dogmatic notions, maintaining that all religions held unchanging and eternal truths. Similar to Tolstoy, Van Gogh led a spiritual life rooted in tolerance, which he believed was essential for social harmony and personal well-being. Spirituality brought Van Gogh closer to society's outcasts. He felt a strong moral duty to respect life, as he mentioned in his letter, where the existence or absence of mutual regard was vital to him, illustrating that spiritual unity was more significant than anything else.

Van Gogh prioritized an individual's spiritual and moral values over their allegiance to religious dogma. He stressed that being a believer or a non-believer was an individual choice, but behaving morally and embracing ethical values was more important. He believed that spirituality was the means to enhance these moral values, even for church authorities.

But Van Gogh was troubled by his old religious beliefs. He thought that religion alone can no longer be used as a medium to help the needy, but art embedded with spirituality and divinity would help him spread God's light and love. "Van Gogh insists that artistic creativity is itself an expression of religious value", as noted by Patrick Grant (*Reading Vincent van Gogh* 19). So, he started using the medium of colors to spread the importance of spirituality in people's lives.

His passion for paintings and drawings began when he was working at Goupil and Cie in The Hague as an art dealer, even before he decided to become an artist. Thus, he always kept himself close to the world of art. Even when he was working as an evangelist, he believed that art could help him convey the religious messages he intended, because for him, art was sacred. However, at the beginning of his evangelist career, he feared that art would overshadow his passion for evangelism. In letter 148, Van Gogh wrote to Theo about his concern regarding making a sketch, as Van Gogh thought painting would distract him from focusing more on religious duties. But later, he realized that art had a significant moral and spiritual dimension, as it could be effectively utilized to document the plight of underprivileged people. He was obsessed with the idea of rescuing poor people from the clutches of society's evils. Thus, he believed that what he couldn't achieve as an evangelist, he could accomplish with the help of art. Consequently, Van Gogh started focusing on the poor and needy people, endeavoring to depict their lives using colors. He viewed art as a means to convey the harsh realities and challenging lives of working people. Therefore, Van Gogh began to see art as a social gospel, reflecting his growing commitment to aiding the poor through the use of colors.

Van Gogh's spirituality enabled him to become one with nature. He described the powerful feelings he experienced while in contact with nature as the loss of separate awareness and merging with the limitless. As Van Gogh mentioned in his letters, he used stars, wheat fields, sunflowers, irises, butterflies, and sunsets in his paintings as symbols of his spirituality and sources of fulfillment. According to his biographers, Van Gogh abandoned the Church but maintained his spiritual fervor by channeling it into his artwork. Scholars claim that he chose to express the divine as it appears in nature. He painted sunflowers as images of pious individuals traveling God's path to enlightenment and olive trees to symbolize Christ. The sheaves of wheat in his renowned picture of the wheat fields, which appear to collapse into the ground to regenerate life, stand for the never-ending cycle of death and rebirth. Van Gogh wrote to his artist friend, Emile Bernard, “. . . yearnings for that infinite of which the Sower, the sheaf, are the symbols, still enchant me as before” (Letter 628). For Van Gogh, butterflies seemed to represent enlightenment and perhaps even immortality. He often made speculations about the afterlife and the potential for rebirth. The symbol of God and the love of God are powerfully manifested in Van Gogh's most famous piece, *The Starry Night*. Despite enduring excruciating poverty, loneliness, despair, and health problems, Van Gogh found courage in his belief that pain and suffering enriched him spiritually and enhanced his artistic abilities. Despite his suffering, most of his creations reveal God's compassion and love.

Van Gogh's letters before 1886, when he was staying with Theo in Antwerp, primarily dealt with the subject of poor working-class people. He expressed his concerns about these poor people through his letters. He even expressed his outrage at the art

world's ignorance, particularly among dealers who failed to grasp the significance of a new kind of art that not only represented the poor but was also created for them. Similar to his views on religion, Van Gogh believed that morality and spirituality should be the main ingredients of his art. Therefore, he began expressing his moral concerns through art and tried to convey his spiritual thoughts through religious imagery used in his art.

In the letters, Van Gogh clearly stated that rather than using explicit religious imagery in his paintings, he painted spiritual scenes with symbolic imagery connected to religion. Field paintings by Van Gogh are examples of his spiritual ideas. According to Larry Nichols, the museum curator of the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, Van Gogh possessed an awareness of and interest in profound spiritual topics, even though his religious devotion and artistic vision did not manifest themselves in celestial Rubenesque images. Larry Nichols said, "You're not going to see Christ on the cross, but you're going to see paintings of landscapes that are redolent of his considering nature as a reflection of life issues, such as eternity" ("Spirituality Found in Van Gogh's Painting").

Van Gogh's earlier paintings depicted poor peasants and miners, capturing their poverty and their grim, blighted lives filled with hard work and hardships. This demonstrates his consistent sense of empathy and compassion for the downtrodden. While Van Gogh successfully portrayed the suffering of the underprivileged in his paintings, there was something admirable about the peasant portraits. Van Gogh specialists assert that these paintings exude a spiritual aura because they showcased the courage and endurance of the underprivileged, closely aligned with the Bible's teachings on suffering and agony in life, as well as the promise of salvation.

For Van Gogh, Nuenen was his next Borinage because he believed that, just as in Borinage, he could preach through his paintings. He aimed to communicate his moral and spiritual values through his paintings. In Nuenen, he discovered that viewers are emotionally impacted by complementary and contrasting colors on their own. These concepts of expressive technique and color allowed Van Gogh's aesthetic ideology to fully develop, encompassing a quasi-religious sense of sacred and moral understanding. He believed that moral values stemmed from upholding spiritual values, not necessarily from religious ideologies. Thus, he worked on the internal dynamics of art, focusing more on his personal style, and imbued his art with rich moral and spiritual values. For Van Gogh, art was sacred and served as a means to discover and explore the human soul. Therefore, he believed that art could elevate people to higher levels of thought and expression of genuine feelings. Consequently, Van Gogh utilized paintings as a medium to communicate his moral thoughts and spiritual ideologies.

Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

It seems to me that a painter has a duty to try to put an idea into his work. I was trying to say this in this print—but I can't say it as beautifully, as strikingly as reality, of which this is only a dim reflection seen in a dark mirror—that it seems to me that one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the existence of “something on high” in which Millet believed, namely in the existence of a God and an eternity, is the unutterably moving quality that there can be in the expression of an old man like that, without his being aware of it perhaps, as he sits so quietly in the corner of

his hearth. At the same time something precious, something noble, that can't be meant for the worms. (Letter 288)

As noted by art historian Judy Sund in her book *Van Gogh: Art and Ideas (A & I)*, Van Gogh believed in the supreme power of God, but not in the sense understood by any particular religion. He viewed the world and its surroundings from a distinctly biblical perspective. Judy Sund also mentioned that Van Gogh did not adhere to conventional traditional art; rather, he aimed to incorporate meaningful religious imagery imbued with spirituality. Judy Sund further expressed that Van Gogh had developed a unique style that focused on both religion and humanism, derived from ideas borrowed from 19th-century writers and philosophers. An analysis of Van Gogh's letters makes it evident that he proposed a religious humanism that urged religion to fulfill the social needs of those who were in need.

In *The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom: The Thought and Art of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin*, Naomi Margolis Maurer noted that Vincent adhered to a religion that instilled followers with awe and respect for all creations and the creator. Through religion, Van Gogh also aimed to inspire feelings of charity, compassion, and sympathy for those who were suffering. Hence, Van Gogh observed that to assimilate all these qualities, spirituality should be infused as an essence of religion. He believed that the institutional power of religion was unnecessary, as he saw nothing institutional about it.

In conclusion, spirituality played a significant role in the life and career of Vincent van Gogh. His faith, compassion, and belief in the power of art to bring people closer to God influenced his work and helped shape him into one of the most iconic artists in history. His paintings stand as a testament to the transformative power of

spirituality and a reminder of the significance of faith, empathy, and compassion in our lives.

Van Gogh's faith was rooted in his belief in God and his love for humanity. Raised in a religious family, he maintained a strong connection to his faith throughout his life. Spirituality served as a source of comfort and inspiration for Van Gogh, reflecting in many of his paintings depicting religious scenes. Through his art, Van Gogh sought to express his spiritual beliefs and convey his love for God and humanity.

Van Gogh's interest in literature led him into the world of books, aiding him in improving his language and writing skills. He began reading books with more liberal ideas, which broadened his philosophical and spiritual perspectives. This reading habit contributed to him becoming a proficient letter-writer, offering him the freedom to express his spiritual thoughts. Thus, books became a source of inspiration for Van Gogh in shaping his spiritual ideas and developing a profound sense of empathy and compassion toward those in need of spiritual guidance.

Van Gogh consistently reached out to those in need, irrespective of their social status. This compassion is evident in many of his paintings, often depicting the lives of impoverished working-class people. Therefore, Van Gogh's spiritual beliefs also influenced his approach to art. He believed that art should serve as a form of spiritual expression, possessing the power to uplift and inspire. He perceived himself as a messenger of God, employing his paintings to spread love, hope, and positivity to the world. Through his art, Van Gogh endeavored to give voice to the marginalized and draw attention to their struggles, with empathy and compassion attesting to his profound spiritual beliefs.

Hence, Van Gogh shaped his religious and spiritual ideologies with the aid of books, expressing his thoughts and views through his letters and art. As observed, his letters are replete with religious and spiritual thoughts. Thus, by analyzing Vincent van Gogh's letters, this chapter portrays him as a writer and illustrates how spirituality assisted in refining his life and career. The letters unmistakably demonstrate the significance of spirituality in religion and its role in Van Gogh's life.

Chapter III

Religious Imageries in Vincent Van Gogh's Post-Impressionist

Paintings

Vincent van Gogh developed an interest in painting after his failed career as an evangelist. He believed that colors could serve as a medium of expression to convey his thoughts and opinions, prompting him to pursue art. Despite lacking an artistic background, except for a brief stint in art dealership, his artistic career spanned a mere ten years. Despite his departure from evangelism, Van Gogh remained fixated on spiritual and divine musings. Consequently, art became his chosen platform to articulate his ideas on divinity and spiritual ideologies. This led him to embrace Post-Impressionism as his artistic style of choice, as it provided artists a canvas to manifest their individual ideas and religious thoughts through religious imagery and spiritual elements in their paintings. Therefore, this chapter scrutinizes Van Gogh's paintings, portraying him as an artist who harnessed religious imagery in tandem with the Post-Impressionist style to communicate his concepts of divinity and spirituality through his artworks.

This chapter analyzes selected paintings by Van Gogh to elucidate why he opted to be a Post-Impressionist artist and how the Post-Impressionist style facilitated the expression of his divine and spiritual contemplations through his paintings. Accordingly, the initial section of this chapter scrutinizes and interprets Christian religious imagery found within Vincent van Gogh's paintings. Subsequently, the chapter delves into his chosen works, examining the Buddhist religious imagery he incorporated into his paintings. By dissecting the Christian and Buddhist religious imagery present in Van

Gogh's selected artworks, the analysis seeks to unveil pivotal events in his life, presenting him as an artist whose lifelong journey was imbued with spirituality.

In the first four years of his artistic career, Van Gogh, a newcomer to the art world, devoted his attention to drawings and watercolor paintings, thereby immersing himself in the technical aspects of art. In November 1880, he enrolled in a drawing course at the Brussels Academy, Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, where he was granted a free education and access to a well-lit studio. In a letter to his brother Theo, he mused, “I do not, however, dismiss the idea of L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts, in as much as, for example, I could go there in the evening as long as I’m here, if it’s free or not expensive” (Letter 159). Despite embarking on a career as an artist and creating some works, he displayed a reluctance to join an art academy. Financial concerns underpinned his hesitance, coupled with his desire to achieve financial stability to aid impoverished peasants in his community. In the same letter, number 159, Van Gogh articulated, “Once I am master of my pencil or watercolor or etching, I can return to the region of the miners or weavers, to do things better from life than thus far”. During his time at the art academy, he participated in a painting competition, which he did not succeed in, leading to his swift departure from the academy.

Following his departure from the art academy in 1881, Van Gogh relocated to Etten, his father's parsonage, and concentrated on producing paintings primarily centered on nature. Despite his diligence, he encountered difficulties in grasping the technical and theoretical aspects of art, prompting him to seek guidance from experienced artists. Consequently, in 1881, he departed Etten for The Hague to refine his skills under the tutelage of Anton Mauve, a Dutch landscape artist. This transition afforded him numerous

opportunities to deepen his understanding of painting, including visits to various museums and engaging in discussions on art with fellow artists. These experiences contributed to his artistic growth and confidence in experimenting with oil painting, resulting in the creation of several oil paintings during the summer of 1882.

Van Gogh's passion for nature and his affinity for peasants' plights impelled him to move to Drenthe in the northern Netherlands, alongside Mauve and other Dutch artists. Between 1884 and 1885, he resided in a rural village in Nuenen, during which time he focused extensively on three themes: still life, landscape, and figures. The artworks he generated during this period revolved around the lives and struggles of peasants, endowing his art with a bolder and more progressive character. However, his sojourn in Nuenen left him feeling isolated, leading him to eventually depart.

Van Gogh's burgeoning interest in Peter Paul Rubens prompted him to journey to Antwerp, Belgium, to immerse himself in the artistic enchantment of Rubens's works. Delving into Rubens's art, Van Gogh honed his style by blending various colors to convey the painting's mood. Concurrently, he found inspiration in Japanese prints and Impressionism. Consequently, these influences left a more profound impact than the theoretical teachings from the Antwerp Academy. However, his appetite for artistic growth remained insatiable, driving him to broaden his themes and style. He began to glean lessons not only from his art classes but also from his environment, fellow artists, local life, and diverse painting techniques employed worldwide. As articulated in an article on Van Gogh by Britannica, "His understanding of the possibilities of painting was evolving rapidly; from studying Hals he learned to portray the freshness of a visual impression, while the works of Paolo Veronese and Eugène Delacroix taught him that

colour can express something by itself'. In 1886, after a mere three months, Van Gogh bid adieu to the Antwerp Academy and relocated to Paris to reside with Theo.

Van Gogh's time in Paris proved transformative for his artistic trajectory. There, he encountered several contemporary artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Paul Gauguin, who assisted him in exploring the burgeoning advancements in French painting. Theo introduced him to numerous Impressionist artists, most notably Camille Pissarro and Georges Seurat. During the period between spring and February of 1886, Van Gogh's paintings underwent remarkable metamorphosis, veering away from his conventional style. His works began embracing diverse styles, coalescing into a distinctive artistic approach characterized by brushstrokes and vibrant colors. His color palette transitioned from subdued tones to vivid hues with luminous tonalities, while his artworks adopted more contemporary artistic trends. The outset of 1888 marked the birth of a novel style, Post-Impressionism, evident in Van Gogh's creations. Notable masterpieces from this era, such as *Portrait of Père Tanguy* and *Self-Portrait in Front of the Easel*, stand as exemplars of the Post-Impressionist style. Weary of urban life, he departed Paris in February 1888, seeking solace in the embrace of nature in Arles.

Arles represented a refuge for Van Gogh, an escape from the bustling city into an environment reminiscent of Japanese models, adorned by serene natural beauty. In a letter to Theo on September 10th, 1889, composed during his stay in the Saint-Rémy asylum, Van Gogh elucidated his inspiration for moving to Arles:

My dear brother, you know that I came to the south and threw myself into work for a thousand reasons. To want to see another light, to believe that looking at nature under a brighter sky can give us a more accurate idea of

the Japanese way of feeling and drawing. Wanting, finally, to see this stronger sun, because one feels that without knowing it one couldn't understand the paintings of Delacroix from the point of view of execution, technique, and because one feels that the colours of the prism are veiled in mist in the north. (Letter 801)

He stayed around Arles until his death in 1890. In this period, he created more than 200 paintings, absorbing the beauty of “blossoming fruit trees, views of the town and surroundings, self-portraits, portraits of Roulin the postman and other friends, interiors and exteriors of the house, sunflowers, and landscapes—marked his first great period” (Britannica).

Van Gogh not only created the paintings but also added his own feelings to the subjects by emphasizing the contours and using different types and levels of colors, thus giving life and individuality to his paintings. As his paintings showcase his emotions and feelings, sometimes his paintings seem rushed, reflecting his spontaneous instincts and capturing his mood. As mentioned in the article published by Britannica, “Van Gogh’s style was spontaneous and instinctive, for he worked with great speed and intensity, determined to capture an effect or a mood while it possessed him”.

His artistic style was individualistic, but he was able to find some fellow artists who shared similar ideas about art. However, they never used a term to define their new art movement, unlike the Impressionists. Instead, they conveyed the new concepts and features of their art through their artwork. This marked a new period in the sphere of art, and the world witnessed a new French art period called Post-Impressionism. But this term was coined later, after the Post-Impressionist movement, even after the death of Van

Gogh. The new art movement was formed under the leadership of the artists of that time, such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Paul Cézanne. Later, Paul Cézanne came to be hailed as the father of Post-Impressionism.

Even though the term 'Post-Impressionism' means 'after Impressionism,' the Impressionists were still working and focusing on their painting style during the time of Post-Impressionism. And Post-Impressionism acknowledges the importance that Impressionism played in the world of art. According to Nathalia Brodskaja, Impressionism “. . . was so spectacular that none of the then-living artists following non-academic paths could avoid its influence. Whether a supporter or an adversary of Impressionism, no artist at the end of the nineteenth century could detach himself from what Monet and his friends had done” (*Post-Impressionism* 256). So, the era of Post-Impressionism cannot be called the end of Impressionism, but the art style and themes adopted by them seem different, and Impressionistic ideas were considered somewhat old. As mentioned by Nathalia Brodskaja in her book *Post-Impressionism*, “During that period the Impressionists were still alive and working. After 1886 Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro and Alfred Sisley created many new pieces, but the period of their creative unity, their joint quest and performances were things of the past” (255).

Félix Fénéon, a Parisian art critic, was the first person who defined the basic elements of Impressionism, which helped in distinguishing it from traditional painting (Brodskaja 256). He also published a series of articles named “Impressionists in 1886” in the year 1886. According to him, Impressionism is a school of colorists with a new vision

of art. Félix Fénéon's words were noted in the book *Post-Impressionism* by Nathalia Brodskaja,

Impressionism has established a new vision in art . . . (...) All historical, allegorical, mythological, or overly literary subjects are forbidden; Work is directly based on nature, and not performed in the studio based on memories, sketches, or written documents; Concern for the emotional significance of colours; An effort to approach brilliant, natural luminosity – the Impressionist school is a school of colourists. (qtd. Brodskaja 256)

Impressionists rejected traditional approaches to art, so most works by Impressionist artists were not allowed at art exhibitions. Thus, Impressionists encouraged independent art exhibitions instead of state-controlled academies and salons. The first such exhibition took place in 1874. They focused on contemporary landscapes, reflecting modern living, and rejected conventional ways of drawing and recreating old artworks and scenes from myths. Their main focus was on light, atmosphere, and movement. As stated in the article "Impressionism and Post-Impressionism", "Confronting nature and modern city life directly, the Impressionists differed from their antecedents because they painted en plein air (in the open air) and used a palette of pure colours".

For the Post-Impressionists, the focal point was not only rendering light and color, but also incorporating symbolic and meaningful content, and the formal order and structure of artworks. However, the common artistic style they both adopted was the artificiality of pictures, rather than realism. According to the article published by Oxford Art Online, "Similar to the Impressionists, however, they stressed the artificiality of the picture. The Post-Impressionists also believed that color could be independent from form

and composition as an emotional and aesthetic bearer of meaning” (“Impressionism and Post-Impressionism”), thus giving a sense of creativity and uniqueness to their works.

Van Gogh was an artist who prioritized the symbolic and meaningful content of paintings and followed individual art styles with a focus on the structure of the artwork. Thus, Van Gogh leaned more towards Post-Impressionism because it provided him more individual space to express his thoughts and emotions with deep meaningful content.

The term 'Post-Impressionism' was coined by art critic Roger Fry in 1906, describing the French art period from Manet and the Impressionists onwards. This period is considered short, spanning from the late nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth century, roughly dating from 1886 to 1900.

According to Nathalia Broadskaiia,

The era ends after 1900, running only into the first decade of the twentieth century. Although ‘Post-Impressionism’ and its chronological limits are well-defined, it seems that several Post-Impressionist works exist outside this period. Despite this period’s extreme brevity, it is often described as an ‘era’ of Post-Impressionism. In fact, this twenty-year period saw the emergence of such striking artistic phenomena, such varying styles of pictorial art and such remarkable creative personalities, that these years at the turn of the century can without a doubt be characterised as an ‘era’.

(Post-Impressionism 255)

Post-Impressionism distanced itself from Impressionists' naturalism and their use of color and form as the most expressive style. Instead, Post-Impressionists were drawn to “thick application of paint, distinctive brush strokes, and real-life subject matter, and

were more inclined to emphasize geometric forms, distort forms for expressive effect, and to use unnatural or arbitrary colours in their compositions” (“Post-Impressionism”). The Post-Impressionist era witnessed the rise of individualistic art rich in emotions, symbolic meaning, spiritual elements, and a well-defined structure.

The main reasons Post-Impressionist artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec rejected Impressionist paintings were the trivial subjects used by Impressionists and the lack of structure in their artworks. Most Post-Impressionists adhered to a definite structure in their paintings. For example, George Seurat and his followers employed Pointillism, while Paul Cézanne focused on providing order and structure to his paintings “by reducing objects to their basic shapes while retaining the bright fresh colours of Impressionism” (“Post-Impressionism 1886-1906”). Vincent van Gogh favored vibrant colors and brushstrokes, following a specific pattern and structure to convey his feelings and emotions.

When Van Gogh was in Paris, he collaborated closely with Impressionists. However, realizing that Impressionism couldn't fulfill his artistic ideas, he began experimenting with different methods. He moved to Arles, seeking an art style that allowed his unique individual style and spiritual thoughts. This geographic separation from the Impressionist center allowed him to explore new artistic methods. In Arles, he adopted a bold and psychedelic painting style, focusing on natural subjects and everyday life while delving into his inner emotions. This marked his transition into a full-fledged Post-Impressionist artist. Following the forms, structure, and color of Post-Impressionism, Van Gogh effectively conveyed his thoughts on spirituality and divinity through his paintings.

While his 1888 paintings predominantly reflect the Post-Impressionist style, traces of Post-Impressionism are evident even in his first masterpiece, *The Potato Eaters* (1885). As he sought to convey his spiritual thoughts, Van Gogh incorporated religious imagery and symbolic meanings into his works. Analyzing *The Potato Eaters* (see fig. 1) in light of Post-Impressionist theory illustrates how Van Gogh expressed his spiritual thoughts through this painting.



Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

When Van Gogh began painting *The Potato Eaters*, his primary focus was on absorbing the harsh reality of the impoverished working-class people in Nuenen. As painting from life is a significant characteristic of Post-Impressionist theory, Van Gogh adhered to it in *The Potato Eaters*. His aim was to depict how these peasant people

remained connected to spiritual and divine thoughts. In this context, Van Gogh sought to compare himself to the potato eaters, illustrating that just as he maintained his spiritual and divine spirit during difficult times, these individuals also held strong spiritual beliefs.

After being dismissed from his evangelist position, Van Gogh turned to art as a means to reflect the spiritual and divine elements present in nature and people. He believed that the aura of God was mirrored in the lives of the poor, and thus, the hardships of the poor portrayed in *The Potato Eaters* showcased the presence of God within them. Consequently, Van Gogh depicted the challenging lives of country peasants who struggled to make ends meet. In a letter to Theo, he wrote, ". . . I believe there's life in it" (Letter 492).

Regarding the faces of the peasant characters depicted in the painting, Van Gogh dedicated special attention to capturing their tired expressions. To capture the genuine emotions of these peasants, he frequently visited the De Groot cottage during their evening meals. Following these studies, he painted five peasant characters gathered around a table, sharing a meal after their strenuous work.

Van Gogh was drawn to the simple and honest lives of these individuals, sensing a raw human authenticity imbued with spirituality that was absent in the increasingly industrialized society of his time. He aimed not to idealize peasant life but to encapsulate their genuine emotions, especially their sorrowful expressions and intense gazes. He wanted to portray the spiritual essence within these peasants, emphasizing the significance of their calloused hands from toiling, notably while digging potatoes. In discussing *The Potato Eaters* with artist Anthon van Rappard, Van Gogh explicitly conveyed the importance of the peasants' heads and hands in the painting, as they were the focal points.

Instead of merely representing subjects with accurate colors like Impressionists, Van Gogh utilized colors that conveyed the emotions of the subjects and scenes, aligning with the artist's individual perspective. This approach adhered to the principles of Post-Impressionism. To achieve a realistic effect, Van Gogh employed earth tones and depicted the dusty, unpeeled potato's color on the peasants. This choice of colors rendered a subdued appearance to the entire painting. Van Gogh noted, “. . . something like the colour of a really dusty potato, unpeeled of course” (Letter 499). In addition to the potato color, the dark interior of the painting featured blue, green, and brown hues, aligning with nature. The earthy tones highlighted the peasants' weathered faces, and their silhouettes were painted in dark colors, evoking solemnity and seriousness.

Religious themes often involved sharing food in 19th-century art. Van Gogh incorporated this theme in depicting the potato eaters. Within *The Potato Eaters*, the peasant characters aren't engaged in conversation but are wholly focused on the ritualistic act of sharing a meal. They gather around a common table under a single oil lamp hanging from the ceiling's beams at the painting's center. This composition underscores the communal nature of sharing and reveals the potato eaters as a close-knit community, emphasizing their humanity and moral beauty. The painting's somber mood is enhanced by the single warm light that unites the peasants with a shared emotion of love. This light alludes to the Gospel's message and the light Jesus brought into the lives of the poor peasants. According to Kathleen Powers Erickson, Van Gogh painted the oil lamp in the painting to be “the symbol of ‘Ray of Light from on High’ which Van Gogh saw in the literature of Victor Hugo and the paintings of Corot and Millet” (“From Preaching to Painting”). *The Potato Eaters* painting also alludes to the Last Supper in Christianity,

where the peasants sit around the table symbolizing the table of the altar, and the food on the table is a sacrament for these hardworking peasant people.

A small Christian crucifix hung on the wall in the painting symbolizes the connection of these impoverished individuals to God. It signifies their religious beliefs and also reflects Van Gogh's own Christian faith, despite his disagreements with the Church's rules.

Transitioning from his initial masterpiece characterized by Post-Impressionism, this chapter primarily analyzes paintings from 1888 to 1890, the final three years of Van Gogh's life, during which he fully embraced the role of a Post-Impressionist artist. These artworks explore pivotal moments in Van Gogh's life and underscore his enduring spiritual depth. Consequently, the next painting chosen for analysis is *The Yellow House* (or *The Street*) (see fig. 2), painted in 1888. This artwork encapsulates a significant period of his artistic journey, with the Yellow House serving as a catalyst in shaping and inspiring him as a fully realized Post-Impressionist artist.



Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh, *The Yellow House*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The painting *The Yellow House* showcases the house to which Van Gogh moved in order to distance himself from the influence of Impressionist artists. *The Yellow House* painting combines realistic images with a profound subtext for the author, describing the artist's real life. It has become a source of inspiration for Van Gogh. When he created this painting, he was filled with hope and enthusiasm. Additionally, this house witnessed numerous dramatic moments in Van Gogh's life, rendering *The Yellow House* painting truly special. Within the painting, several religious and spiritual images suggest Van Gogh's interest in the divine and spiritual elements.

Van Gogh was profoundly drawn to the color yellow; he painted his walls with the same hue and named his exquisite residence the 'Yellow House'. Before Paul Gauguin moved in, Van Gogh adorned it with his yellow sunflower paintings as a

welcome gesture. In one of his letters to Theo, Van Gogh described the sketches of his Yellow Houses, which he enclosed with the letter, stating, “tremendous, these Yellow Houses in the sunlight and then the incomparable freshness of the blue” (Letter 691). In many cultures, yellow is linked to spirituality and enlightenment. As noted in *The Yellow House: Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin Side by Side* by Susan Goldman Rubin, the color yellow holds special meaning for Van Gogh. For him, yellow symbolizes the desire to live and create anew with a spiritual essence. As Van Gogh transitioned into a Post-Impressionist artist, he chose to inhabit a yellow house, aligning himself with spiritual needs. Moreover, yellow signifies hope. To him, the yellow house wasn't merely a dwelling, but a beacon of hope and a path toward realizing his dream of establishing a southern workshop for artists who shared common artistic interests and ideas. He aimed to create an artists' colony, a space for communal living and collaboration. As he painted *The Yellow House*, he was essentially painting the house of his long-cherished dream. Thus, through the painting, Van Gogh not only depicted his life but also his beliefs and thoughts.

In front of the yellow house stands a tree. Trees symbolize growth, renewal, and immortality. In certain religions, trees are revered as sacred. Van Gogh himself wrote in several letters that he viewed trees as a beautiful and intense facet of nature. By including the tree in his painting, Van Gogh aimed to convey the sacredness and spirituality inherent in the house he inhabited. Light often carries religious symbolism, representing spiritual enlightenment or divine presence. The use of light in the painting indicates the presence of divinity and spirituality within Van Gogh's dwelling. *The Yellow House*

employs bright, vibrant colors and thick brushstrokes to convey energy and vitality, which could metaphorically signify spiritual awakening.

Hence, the yellow house itself serves as a symbol of spirituality, as Van Gogh regarded it as a sanctuary of creativity. In a letter to Theo in 1888, Van Gogh explained how he transformed his room in the yellow house into a studio, a space for creative work and contemplation. This suggests that the house held spiritual significance for Van Gogh, functioning as a haven where he could connect with his inner self and artistic vision. Therefore, this painting exudes beauty, vitality, spirituality, and emotional depth that transcends the material realm.

During his time in Arles, in mid-September 1888, Van Gogh painted *The Café Terrace at Night* (see fig. 3), the first in a series that captured the night sky's splendor with dazzling stars in vibrant color. This painting represents Van Gogh's inaugural historic and famous Post-Impressionist-style depiction of a star-filled sky. The painting gained significance, becoming the second most reproduced artwork by Van Gogh between 2000 and 2010. Despite never signing the painting, Van Gogh detailed and described *The Café Terrace at Night* in three letters addressed to his sister, Willemina Jacoba van Gogh, his brother Theo van Gogh, and Eugene Boch. In one of these letters, he even included a drawing of *The Café Terrace at Night*.



Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *The Café Terrace at Night*, 1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Van Gogh painted *The Café Terrace at Night* not from his memory but from the location, by overlooking the famous café in Arles, Café Terrace at The Place du Forum. Van Gogh once wrote to his Belgian artist friend, Eugène Guillaume Boch, “. . . a view of the café on place du Forum, where we used to go, painted at night” (Letter 691). The painting brims with all the emotions and excitement he felt at the time of painting, filling it with soul and life, and making it more vibrant. The painting clearly mirrors the enjoyment of the artist who embraces every moment there without being lost in his thoughts of hopelessness but brightly lightened with the colorful outdoor view of the place. The mood of the artist helps in creating the artwork, a picturesque one. Although *The Café Terrace at Night* is not a religious painting, it does contain elements of spirituality and religious imagery. One of the most prominent elements of spirituality in

the painting is the use of light. The café is illuminated with bright, warm light that emanates from the lamps and the stars in the sky. This light creates a sense of warmth and intimacy, symbolizing spiritual illumination or enlightenment. The use of light also creates a sense of mystery and wonder, which could be interpreted as a representation of the divine or transcendent. Another element of spirituality in the painting is the use of color. Van Gogh used a variety of bright and contrasting colors to create a sense of energy and movement. The warm tones of the buildings and the café contrast with the cool blue of the sky and the stars, creating a sense of balance and harmony. This use of color could be seen as symbolic of the unity and interconnectedness of all things, a central theme in many spiritual traditions. The arches of the buildings and the trees in the background create a sense of Gothic architecture, referring to the traditional Christian cathedrals of Europe. This imagery could be interpreted as a symbol of the sacredness and spiritual significance of architecture and the built environment. Additionally, the people in the painting are depicted as having their heads bowed in prayer or contemplation. This pose, along with the calm and peaceful atmosphere of the café, could represent the importance of mindfulness and introspection in spiritual practice.

Explaining his need for painting stars to connect himself with religion, at the time of working on the painting *The Café Terrace at Night*, Van Gogh wrote to Theo: “. . . a tremendous need for, shall I say the word – for religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars, and I always dream a painting like that, with a group of lively figures of the pals” (Letter 691). Jared Baxter, a writer-researcher on Van Gogh, found some allusions to Da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper* in his scholarly article “Café Terrace at Night,” presented at the 2013 European Conference on Arts & Humanities. In fact, a close

examination of the painting uncovers that the central figure, who has long hair, is flanked by 12 other people, similar to *The Last Supper* (“Café Terrace at Night”). Additionally, a cross sign shines in the background of the composition, and Van Gogh added more cross-like shapes throughout the piece. Perhaps Judas is represented by the shadowy figure sliding through the threshold.

Another of Van Gogh’s paintings, *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, is of remarkable interest in the starry-night sky series. By the end of September 1888, before being admitted to the Saint-Rémy asylum, Van Gogh painted *Starry Night Over the Rhone* (see fig. 4). It was the second painting among the starry-night sky series, capturing the beautiful night view with stars. *Starry Night Over the Rhone* differed from the other starry-night sky paintings because he not only captured the dazzling colors of the nighttime sky but also the artificial lighting and its reflection on the water, which was very innovative for that period. In *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, to make the painting more picturesque, Van Gogh stretched out everything in the location near the Rhone River, beneath the serene sparkle of the natural lights in the sky. He painted the quay along with a few small boats in the foreground. To add a more romantic portrayal, two figures stand close to the right side, looking at the spectators, seemingly enjoying a leisurely stroll down the riverbank. Van Gogh’s sparkling stars and wavering lake reflections in *Starry Night Over the Rhone* made the painting romantic and added to its mood, bringing a modern attempt and novelty to his art. Only a handful of Van Gogh's paintings were seen in public before his passing, and *Starry Night Over the Rhone* was one of them. It was included in the 1889 Société des Indépendants exhibition in Paris.



Fig. 4. Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night Over the Rhone*, 1888, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Like all his other paintings, *Starry Night Over the Rhone* was also painted when he was inspired by a profoundly touching encounter with the never-ending blackness. This was an event that Van Gogh wrote about in a letter to Theo, showing his enthusiasm to paint this night-time landscape as an indicator of something deeper than a passing interest in beauty. He mentioned his urge and propensity to paint the night and its repercussions in multiple letters to other people. He always wanted to capture the effects of light at night, and the Rhône River scene fulfilled that wish. Not by starlight, but by its own artificial light that is dispersed throughout and reflected on the rippling water in the front, as if they were light beams traveling from one bank to the other, and you can see the town across the river in the distance.

The key components of this painting are color and light, which also served as Van Gogh's research topic. He mentioned the art style and color pattern used in the *Starry Night Over the Rhone* painting twice in his letters. One was addressed to his brother Theo, and the other letter was to his artist friend, Eugène Boch. In letter 691, written to his brother, he made note of the colors he used, referring to the sky as "aquamarine," the water as "royal blue," and the earth as "mauve." ". In Van Gogh's words,

. . . – the starry sky at last, actually painted at night, under a gas-lamp. The sky is green-blue, the water is royal blue, the areas of land are mauve. The town is blue and violet. The gaslight is yellow, and its reflections are red gold and go right down to green bronze. Against the green-blue field of the sky the Great Bear has a green and pink sparkle whose discreet paleness contrasts with the harsh gold of the gaslight. Two small coloured figures of lovers in the foreground. (Letter 691)

Again, he wrote to Eugène Boch, describing the color combination of his painting. Van Gogh wrote, “. . . lastly, a study of the *Rhône*, of the town under gaslight and reflected in the blue river. With the starry sky above — with the Great Bear — with a pink and green sparkle on the cobalt blue field of the night sky, while the light of the town and its harsh reflections are of a red gold and a green tinged with bronze” (Letter 693).

The importance of light and colors in the painting is notable in terms of spirituality as well. The stars and moon in the painting were depicted as bright and radiant, while the water below was dark and reflective. This contrast between light and dark could be interpreted as representing the duality of good and evil or the struggle

between the material and spiritual worlds. The use of light in the painting could also be seen as a reference to divine illumination, as light was often associated with spiritual enlightenment or revelation.

The painting represents the sublime, a concept that was popular among Romantic artists and writers in the 19th century. The sublime refers to the experience of awe or overwhelming emotion in the face of something grand or mysterious, such as a vast natural landscape or a powerful storm. Thus, the painting's swirling sky and glittering stars could be seen as representing this idea of the sublime, as they create a sense of wonder and transcendence.

Van Gogh narrated the personal struggles he underwent when he was living in the yellow house through the painting *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, which was painted in January 1889. After Paul Gauguin came to live with Van Gogh in the yellow house by the end of October 1888, they planned many artworks together. However, when they started working together, differences of opinion and disputes arose between them. They lived together for nine weeks, encouraging one another as rivals and collaborators. But they had a heated argument one day, and Van Gogh, out of acute despair and anger, used a razor to cut off the lower portion of his left ear on 23rd December 1888. On December 30, 1888, the Arles newspaper 'Le Forum Republicain' published the report of this incident in their newspaper,

Last Sunday, at 11:30 in the evening, Vincent Vaugogh [sic], a painter of Dutch origin, called at the Brothel No. 1, asked for a woman called Rachel and handed her ... his ear, saying: 'Guard this object with your life'. Then he disappeared. When informed of the action, which could only be that of

a pitiful madman, the police went the next day to his house and discovered him lying on his bed apparently at the point of death. The unfortunate man has been rushed to hospital. (qtd. in Bylsma)

Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear (see fig. 5) was painted after he had been discharged from the hospital with his left ear bandaged, following the horrific act of self-mutilation.



Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, 1889, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

In the painting, the bandage is on the right ear since the painting is a mirror image. Van Gogh painted it by looking at himself in a mirror. He focused solely on painting three-quarters of his body, as if standing in his famous yellow house. He

showcased his bandaged ear, wearing a closed green coat and a fur hat. In the background of the painting, a canvas is propped up on an easel to his right, along with a Japanese print. Barely discernible, a trace beneath exposes what seems to be a still-life painted over.

Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* is a highly symbolic and emotional artwork reflecting the artist's inner turmoil and spiritual struggles. His bandaged left ear is interpreted as a symbol of sacrifice and suffering, reminiscent of the Biblical story of Saint Peter cutting off the ear of a Roman soldier during Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. This painting alludes to Christianity; his slender face with the brutally removed red beard resembles Christ in late-medieval artworks. Like a saint displaying stigmata, Van Gogh depicts his amputated ear beneath the bandage.

Van Gogh painted himself with a bright yellow halo around his head, which could symbolize divine inspiration or enlightenment. This halo starkly contrasts with the painting's dark background, suggesting that Van Gogh's spiritual light shines amid his darkness and pain.

In the top left corner of the painting, a small wooden cross hangs on the wall, symbolizing Van Gogh's Christian faith and belief in redemption through suffering.

Behind Van Gogh, there's a Japanese woodblock print of two geishas in a landscape with Mount Fuji in the backdrop. It's partially hidden by the thin ridge of his cheek and is visible through a blue-framed window to his left. This image symbolizes Van Gogh's fascination with Japanese art and culture, as well as his interest in the Zen Buddhist concept of mindfulness and living in the present moment.

Van Gogh's tools of the trade, his paintbrush and palette, are prominently displayed. These objects symbolize his creative power and ability to transform pain and suffering into art. Overall, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* is a powerful and complex painting with a rich tapestry of religious and spiritual imagery, reflecting Van Gogh's deep inner life and his quest for meaning amid suffering.

Following the violent incident at the yellow house, several weeks later, some of his neighbors signed a petition and submitted it to local authorities. As a result, he was taken to the Arles Hospital and imprisoned in an isolation cell. In May, he voluntarily admitted himself to an asylum in Saint-Rémy, thus putting an end to his 'art studio' dream.

After committing himself to the Saint-Paul asylum in Saint-Rémy, he created his most renowned masterpiece, *The Starry Night* (see fig. 6), in June 1889. *The Starry Night* was the third painting in the starry sky series. It combines his realistic and imaginative view of what he saw through his asylum window, depicting an imaginative view of the expansive vista of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence from his asylum room. Despite frequently painting the area from his iron-barred window, *The Starry Night* remains his only nighttime portrayal of the view. He felt that this painting was calmer compared to his other works. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "I wouldn't be surprised if you liked the starry night and the ploughed fields – they're calmer than some other canvases" (Letter 691).



Fig. 6. Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

When he was in the asylum, he wasn't allowed to paint from his room. Although Van Gogh preferred working from observation, he couldn't do so. Consequently, he began painting *The Starry Night* by referencing the stars from his studio. Thus, he painted from memory and imagination. To enhance the painting's surreal Post-Impressionist features, he applied paint straight from the tubes, achieving the recognizable broad lines and vibrant colors of the image. This creates a portrayal of swirling clouds in a whirling blue sky, a bright crescent yellow moon, and sparkling stars. Rolling hills with a settlement in the background and a wavy, tall cypress touching the sky grace the foreground. However, he produced this painting by recollecting his asylum memories. Hence, he incorporated some asylum views into *The Starry Night*, such as distant mountains and a prominent star.

Van Gogh wrote to Theo, mentioning the enormous stars he observed from the asylum: “This morning I saw the countryside from my window a long time before sunrise with nothing but the morning star, which looked very big” (Letter 777). According to astrophysicists, the moon and stars depicted in *The Starry Night* align with astronomical observations from May 25, 1889, in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, which were subsequently published. In 1889, when Van Gogh painted the sky, Capella exhibited an unusual brightness, prompting him to paint larger, more luminous stars in the artwork. Similarly, the moon emits a substantial amount of light, a quality emphasized by the use of concentric circles. Despite the sky's illumination, the painting's edges remain untouched as the ground retains its blackness. Notably, the long steeple of the church in the Saint-Rémy village settlement, drawn from Van Gogh's imagination, prominently showcases Dutch church features, reflecting his prior work in the Netherlands. Even the moon, which would have realistically been gibbous or around three-quarters full, contrasts with the crescent phase depicted in *The Starry Night*, showcasing a blend of reality and imagination.

Post-Impressionism portrays reality through natural colors and lighting. Post-Impressionists believed art should generate unique forms rather than mere reproductions. Hence, they depicted their reality based on their artistic perceptions, adopting a subjective view of the visual world. Their works represent distinctive personalities and perceptions, leading to a lack of a definitive style. *The Starry Night*, for example, embodies a robust emotional intensity in Van Gogh's art. He relished crafting landscapes that conveyed the emotions and essence of the subject. By breaking free from

conventional artistic norms, he experienced a sense of liberation. This painting epitomizes Van Gogh's distinct aesthetic and expression.

The painting's images further enhance this observation. *The Starry Night* radiates a profound sense of mental discord and emotional intensity ever since Van Gogh painted it. One almost senses his struggle to rein in his emotions, with all his passion and turmoil poured into this masterpiece. The moon and stars appear colossal, almost as if the sky is on the brink of collapse. The cypress tree, an emblem of sorrowful burial, assumes a nearly menacing stance as it confronts the viewer. Van Gogh reimagined his reality, accentuating elements that held personal significance despite the distorted perspectives.

The vast night sky, with its overwhelming dark blue color that comprises the majority of the background, is a striking element in the painting. Its flowing, swirling lines seem to merge at the center to form a spiral-like arrangement, swishing softly across the background in a wavy manner. The sky is illuminated by eleven bright yellow stars that glow like enormous fireballs, contrasting with the cool, fluid night sky—a stunning array of blues and grays. Additionally, the crescent moon in the upper right corner emits a brighter, more orange light than the other stars. The enormous cypress tree in the foreground partially obscures the view of the village and the night sky. Its writhing appearance and the black-green color sharply contrast with the mostly pastel painting. The houses are small and subtly drawn at the bottom right corner of the painting, blending well with the mountains and forest.

The most evident spiritual imagery in the painting is the sky filled with stars, which can be interpreted as a representation of the divine or transcendent. According to color symbolism, the dark blue color represents knowledge. Here, the dark blue color

brimming in the sky symbolizes his artistic knowledge. Van Gogh was not accepted in the art world, but he always believed in his skills and thought that one day the world would recognize his talents. He never abandoned his hope. The eleven stars shining brightly in the sky could be alluded to in a Biblical tale. In the book of Genesis, Joseph has a dream where eleven stars, the sun, and the moon—representing his brothers and parents—bow down to him. Genesis 37:9 states, "And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream more; and, behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me" ("The Church"). Van Gogh, as a talented artist, believed that he would also be accepted in the art world, similar to how Joseph was accepted by his family. While the eleven stars and moon allude to Joseph's dream in the Book of Genesis, the bright yellow color given to the stars and moon signifies hope and creativity. He hoped to receive the recognition he truly deserved for his creativity and talents.

The cypress, with its writhing, dark leaves stretching up the left side of the image, seems to partially muffle the dazzling effect of the night sky. It has a snaky shape and appears out of place with the rest of the image. However, Van Gogh purposefully placed the cypress bush in such a prominent location in the foreground to emphasize the importance of the cypress tree in the painting. Van Gogh led a lonely life in the asylum, and the cypress tree represents the turmoil he felt inside at the time. On the other hand, the stylized cypress tree in the foreground serves as spiritual imagery. The cypress is portrayed as the tree of life motif, symbolizing eternal life. In many cultures, cypress trees used in funeral rites are associated with death and the afterlife. In Christian tradition, they are often found in cemeteries as a symbol of hope and eternal life. The

cypress tree in the painting could be interpreted as a reference to the spiritual journey, with the tree reaching upwards toward the stars. Usually, it is connected to Van Gogh's eventual mysterious death. As his death remains questioned, critics who argue that Van Gogh's death was a suicide use this as an example to show that Van Gogh perhaps intended for his death to be his initial achievement. However, the cypress also symbolizes immortality. It is believed to bridge both worlds—the materialistic world and the afterlife. Thus, the cypress tree acts as a direct link between the earth and heaven in the picture, extending its branches toward the sky. The artist may have been conveying a more optimistic message than most people credit him for.

Dark green is often used as a symbol of change towards tranquility. So, here the dark green color of the tall cypress tree in *The Starry Night* symbolically represents the transition into calmness. As the cypress image is kept in the foreground, it reminds of the violent act of self-mutilation when Van Gogh was in the Yellow House, where Van Gogh wanted to show the transition from that state of violence to calmness, to a peaceful mind where he could paint. The dark green color of the tree also represents growth and his hope to reach heights. Like the tree touching the sky, he also hopes to be on cloud nine with his paintings.

The little houses painted in the village are fairly quiet. Everyone is sound asleep with the lights off, oblivious to the night sky teeming with life and the writhing cypress shrub in front of them. The town in the painting is also depicted in a way that evokes a sense of spirituality. The buildings and houses are nestled together, creating a sense of community and interconnectedness. The windows of the houses are illuminated, which could be interpreted as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment. The town could be seen as a

metaphor for the human community, and the lighted windows represent the inner light within each individual. Van Gogh demonstrated hope through the windows of the houses painted in the village settlement. Despite the darkness of the night, it is still possible to detect light coming from the windows of the dwellings, showing the light of hope. Furthermore, in the painting, there is always light to guide because the sky is filled with brilliant stars. It appears that Van Gogh was finally recovering from his condition.

The red dashes on the side of the church show his mental conflict between the terms - religion and spirituality. He was always spiritual, but he was against the authoritative power of the church. So, the red color which symbolizes both passion and love on one hand and anger or danger on the other hand, shows his attitude towards God and the Church respectively. He was against the Church but always a believer in God.

The crescent moon in the painting could also be interpreted as spiritual imagery. In Islamic tradition, the crescent moon is a symbol of the divine and is often associated with the month of Ramadan. The moon in *The Starry Night* is small and subtle, but it adds to the overall sense of mystery and spirituality in the painting.

Van Gogh emphasized the colors and forms in *The Starry Night* to produce a dreamy image, giving a more Post-Impressionist look to the painting. His use of color, brushstrokes, and composition creates a sense of mystery and spirituality. The swirling, rhythmic brushstrokes that Van Gogh used in the painting could be seen as a representation of the energy and movement of the universe. This could be interpreted as a symbol of the divine energy that animates all things, or as a representation of the spiritual journey towards enlightenment.

Thus, *The Starry Night* piece is a representation of both Van Gogh's disordered psyche and his spiritual thoughts.

The painting *Tree Roots* (see fig. 7), painted in July 1890, is considered one of the last paintings of Van Gogh before his death in July 1890. It is evident from the letter of Andrier Bonger, Theo's brother-in-law, that Van Gogh was painting a forest scene in the morning on the same day before he got shot. Andrier Bonger, in his letter to Theo, wrote, "The morning before his death, he had painted a sous-bois [forest scene], full of sun and life" ("Tree Roots"). And *Tree Roots* is the only other unfinished painting alongside *Wheatfield With Crows* or *Farms Near Auvers*, making it one of the last paintings of Van Gogh.

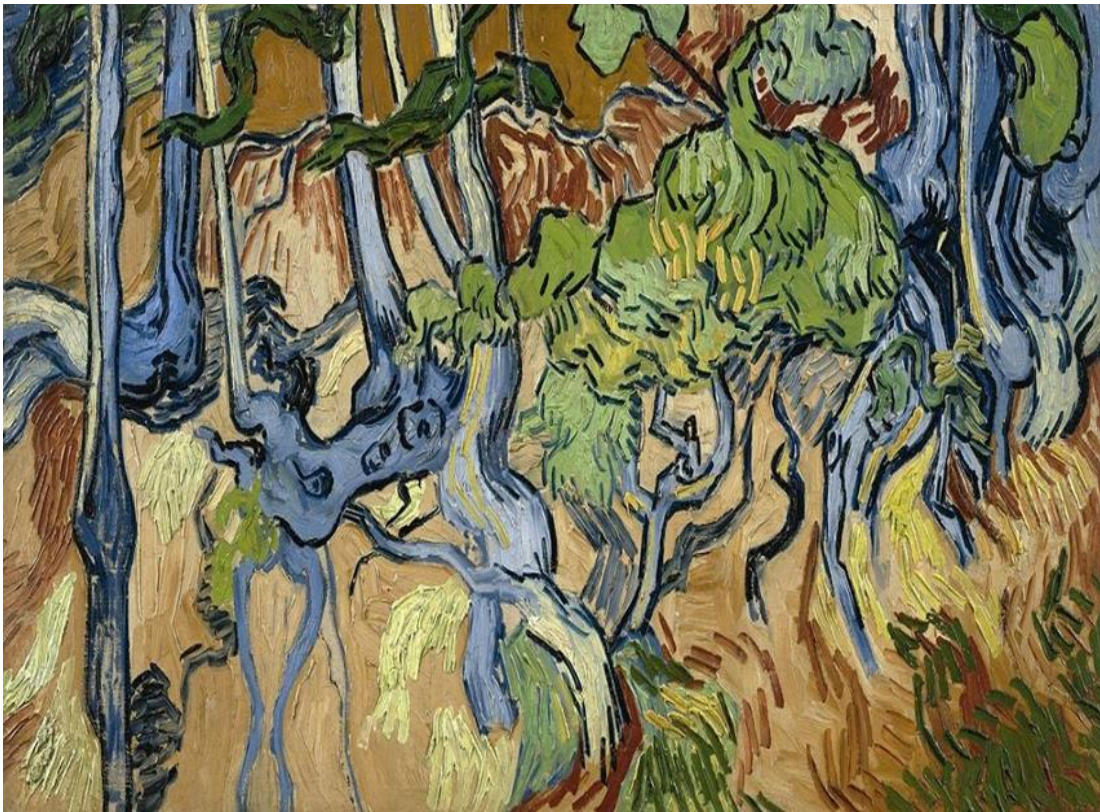


Fig. 7. Vincent van Gogh, *Tree Roots*, 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The crooked roots symbolically represent the painter's agony, with the suicide attempt being the pinnacle of this feeling and the most extreme manifestation of a struggle against existence. So, in addition to Andrier Bonger's letter and the symbolic imagery of death in the painting, the incompleteness of *Tree Roots* adds more credibility to the finding that *Tree Roots* is Van Gogh's last painting.

The painting, *Tree Roots*, presents a captivating arrangement of roots and trunks. Van Gogh created numerous depictions of trees and forests, consistently infusing his artistic work with a sense of anticipation. Most of Van Gogh's woodland paintings depict flowers, underbrush, or trees without their crowns. *Tree Roots* exclusively showcases the lower parts of trees, omitting their upper sections. Through this painting, Van Gogh conveyed his emotional state, expressing the struggles and challenges he faced during the last days of his life. The artwork symbolizes his inner turmoil, encompassing emotions of sadness and anguish, thereby exuding a distinct and Post-Impressionistic ambiance.

The painting is truly exceptional, demonstrating the evolution of modern art while retaining an aura of incompleteness. With this artwork, Van Gogh contributed significantly to the creative landscape of the art world, evident through a shift towards more abstract compositions. As *Tree Roots* is often considered Van Gogh's final artistic gift to the world, many critics believe that he communicated his agony by depicting gnarled and twisted roots and branches. The incline of the landscape and the roots, as suggested by Van Tilborgh, a researcher at the Van Gogh Museum, might metaphorically mirror the artist's uncontrollable mental state ("Van Gogh's Tree Roots Up Close").

Reading *Tree Roots* can be challenging due to the absence of a clear focal point, lending it an abstract quality. However, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent

that, like his other works, *Tree Roots* encompasses Post-Impressionistic characteristics. Besides its individualistic approach, the color palette, forms, and artistic techniques employed in the painting follow a similar pattern to Van Gogh's previous pieces. Despite the vibrant color scheme employed for a seemingly somber theme, the painting contrasts light and life against a backdrop of melancholy. Similarly, some argue that the sense of incompleteness does not solely arise from his premature passing, but rather serves as an intentional aesthetic choice conveying Van Gogh's personal experience. Nevertheless, the enigma surrounding Van Gogh's death persists – whether it was an accidental incident involving two teenagers playing with a malfunctioning gun or an intentional suicide. Symbolism in *Tree Roots* points towards suicide as the cause of his death.

In a letter addressed to Theo, Van Gogh likened himself to tree roots, illustrating his vulnerability as if on the brink of collapse. He wrote, “. . . I usually try to be quite good-humoured, but my life, too, is attacked at the very root, my step also is faltering” (Letter 898). Supported by Van Gogh’s Letter 898, a 2016 Van Gogh Museum video delving into *Tree Roots* features insights from Louis van Tilborgh, a senior scholar and researcher at the Van Gogh Museum. In the video, he suggests that *Tree Roots* serves as Van Gogh's farewell to the world, depicting the frailty of the tree's roots. Louis van Tilborgh remarks in a video analyzing "Tree Roots" as the first painting published by the Van Gogh Museum, “. . . the roots have been laid bare, torn from the earth and hanging perilously” (“Tree Roots” 00:00:37 - 00:00:41). According to Louis van Tilborgh, the painting symbolizes Van Gogh's message that, “I have lived, just like those tree roots. I’ve done my best, I’ve struggled with life, I’ve grown, had setbacks and now is the time it ends. I am falling” (“Tree Roots” 00:00:58 - 00:01:08).

However, what proves most surprising about *Tree Roots* is that Van Gogh had already created studies of tree roots in 1882, revolving around the theme of life as a struggle or misery during his time in The Hague. These *Tree Roots* studies illustrate Van Gogh's life struggles akin to a tree with feeble roots, featuring dark and somber colors that convey his inner distress. He even mentioned these studies in a letter to his brother Theo:

The other one, 'Roots', is some tree roots in sandy ground. I've tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the figure. Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life's struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots. Or rather, because I tried without any philosophizing to be true to nature, which I had before me, something of that great struggle has come into both of them almost inadvertently. At least it seemed to me that there was some sentiment in it, though I may be mistaken, anyway, you'll have to see for yourself. (Letter 222)

This letter underscores how Van Gogh used tree roots as a symbolic representation of his life's anguish and suffering.

The painting suggests several deeper symbolic meanings that could be interpreted in a religious or spiritual context. These include the struggle of the human condition, the connection to nature and the divine, the mood of introspection and reflection, and the idea of family and lineage.

The gnarled, twisted roots dominate the composition. In general, these roots could be interpreted as a symbol of the human condition, which is often fraught with struggle and suffering. The roots also suggest a connection to the earth and to nature, which has long been associated with spirituality and the divine.

Another religious or spiritual element in the painting is the sense of stillness and contemplation that it evokes. The dark and muted colors, the absence of any living creatures, and the heavy, almost oppressive atmosphere all contribute to a sense of introspection and reflection. This mood could be interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual contemplation or meditation.

Finally, there is the title of the painting itself, *Tree Roots*, which suggests a connection to the idea of family, ancestry, and lineage. In many cultures, the tree is seen as a symbol of family, and the roots represent the connection to one's ancestors. This connection to one's past is often seen as an important aspect of spiritual or religious identity.

In a recent study in 2020, with the help of a postcard from 1905, Van Gogh researchers claim that they identified the precise spot where Vincent van Gogh painted his final piece, *Tree Roots*. The new finding about the location of *Tree Roots*, which was concealed in plain sight for years among a tangle of roots close to a rural lane near Paris, sheds more light on his mental state when he was creating the artwork. The finding provides insight into the artist's mental condition on the day he is commonly believed to have fatally shot himself and reinforces the conclusion that Van Gogh's death was by suicide. Researchers at the Van Gogh Museum accepted the discovery of the spot where

Van Gogh applied his final brushstrokes after comparing the painting, the postcard, and the present state of the hillside.

Apart from Christianity, Van Gogh was influenced by Buddhism. The influence of Japanese art led him to explore Buddhism. This chapter also analyzes the Buddhist imagery used by Van Gogh in his paintings to illustrate the influence of Buddhist spiritual and divine elements in the life and works of Vincent van Gogh. It also examines how Van Gogh employed Buddhist imagery and symbols to convey his emotions, mental state, and optimism for the future, highlighting the significance of Buddhist divine and spiritual elements in his life and works.

During Van Gogh's time in Antwerp in 1885, he was captivated by the beauty of Japanese art. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

Just think of that; isn't it almost a new religion that these Japanese teach us, who are so simple and live in nature as if they themselves were flowers? And we wouldn't be able to study Japanese art, it seems to me, without becoming much happier and more cheerful, and it makes us return to nature, despite our education and our work in a world of convention.

(Letter 686)

Van Gogh engaged in various discussions about Japanese art, deepening his understanding of Japonisme. This knowledge prompted him to incorporate Japanese art into his own style. According to the BBC's "Van Gogh and Japan: The Prints that Shaped the Artist," "Japan was, in Van Gogh's mind, an entirely idealised realm, 'a beautiful natural idyll'" (Sooke). This affinity for Japonisme also led him towards Buddhism. Van Gogh wrote a letter to Paul Gauguin portraying himself as a "worshipper of the eternal

Buddha" (Letter 695). Therefore, the selected paintings for analyzing Buddhist religious imagery are Van Gogh's works from the period 1885 to 1890, during which he began reproducing Japanese art and continued until his death in 1890. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "I wrote to Gauguin in reply to his letter that if I too was allowed to enhance my personality in a portrait, trying to show in my portrait not only myself but an Impressionist in general, I had conceived this portrait as being that of a bonze, a simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha" (Letter 697).

Van Gogh's magnum opus, *The Starry Night* (1889) (see fig. 7), is renowned for its rich use of Christian religious imagery, as discussed previously. However, it can also be analyzed in the context of Buddhism, reflecting Van Gogh's Buddhist ideologies.

While exploring the colors used in this painting, the canvas is dominated by the colors blue and yellow. Vincent van Gogh captured the beauty of the night by employing dark blue for the sky. Just as colors hold significance in every religion, they also serve as crucial elements in Buddhism, reflecting their religious culture, beliefs, and traditions.

In Buddhism, five transcendental Buddhas (see fig. 8) embody abstract aspects of Buddhahood. These five Buddhas are represented by five different colors: Yellow, White, Blue, Red, and Green. Each Buddha with a distinct color represents a transformative process that signifies the shift from human delusions to positive qualities.



Fig. 8. *Five Transcendental Buddhas*, 16th century, opaque watercolour on paper, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, United States.

When Van Gogh dominated his canvas with the blue color, he was trying to absorb his own life through colors. The painting, *The Starry Night*, belongs to the Saint-Rémy series, which was painted while he was undergoing treatment for his mental instability in the asylum of Saint-Rémy. This painting simply reflects what he saw through the windows of the Saint-Rémy asylum. When reading this painting in the light of Buddhism, the use of blue color in the painting could be related to the blue-bodied Buddha in sadhana, Akshobya, who belongs to the group of five transcendent Buddhas. Akshobya (see fig. 9) represents that the blue color has the power to transform anger into mirror-like wisdom.



Fig. 9. “Akshobya”, 8 Oct. 2018, *Tibetan Buddhism and Culture*.

As Van Gogh was in the asylum seeking treatment for his traumatic problems, the overwhelming use of the color blue could be interpreted as a source of meditation that Van Gogh embraced through colors. Meanwhile, the meditative position of Akshobya symbolizes the transformation of anger, hard feelings, and frustration into the mirror-like wisdom level. Van Gogh was admitted to the Saint-Rémy asylum after a violent episode in his life during which he cut off a part of his earlobe. From Van Gogh’s letters to Theo, it is clear that Van Gogh volunteered to join the asylum to receive treatment for his traumatic conditions, aiming to restore his stable mental health filled with wisdom.

In the first letter written from the Saint-Rémy asylum in 1889, Van Gogh mentioned his hope to overcome his traumatic condition, which coincided with the creation of *The Starry Night*. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

For the sufferings of anguish aren't funny when you're caught in a crisis... I dare to believe that once one knows what it is, once one is aware of one's state and the possibility of being subject to crises, then one can take action oneself to avoid being caught off guard by the anguish or terror... I have good hope of getting over it, or at least not experiencing crises of such intensity. (Letter 776)

From Van Gogh's letter, it can be inferred that Van Gogh longed to regain his mental health from his anguish and frustration. So, through the use of the color blue in his painting, Van Gogh might have hoped to place himself in a meditative position similar to Akshobya's, in order to transform his frustration into wisdom.

Tracing Van Gogh's life reveals that he was unable to lead a happy life until his death. Throughout his lifetime, most of his days were spent within the walls of various asylums. He was not successful in any of his careers and faced much criticism, failing to gain acceptance in the artistic world by the art critics of his time. These reasons pushed him into the depths of depression and anger. (*Van Gogh's Untold Journey: Revelations of Faith, Family, and Artistic Inspiration*)

However, he never clung to any of these emotions for extended periods; he always endeavored to overcome his traumatic experiences by immersing himself in the world of colors. Like a mirror that neither clings to nor repels any reflections, Van Gogh also acted as a mirror—steadfast and unchanging even in adverse circumstances.

Akshobya's mudra, the Bhumisparsha mudra (see Fig. 10), depicts the earth-touching gesture with the fingertips of his right hand, symbolizing confidence, deep-rootedness, and determination.



Fig. 10. "Bhumisparsha mudra", *Original Buddhas*.

Despite never gaining acceptance in the art world, Van Gogh never wavered in his confidence in his artistic talents. Instead, he sought refuge in the world of paintings. For him, paintings were the sole path to attain wisdom. The blue-colored sky can also be interpreted as the Buddha's Akshyobha Mantra, a mantra aimed at purifying general negative karmas.

Van Gogh was afflicted with Gonorrhoea, and it is believed that he had syphilis. The people of that time criticized him for this disease, considering it a punishment for defying the authoritative power of the church. Although Van Gogh never felt regret regarding this criticism, he was consistently haunted by the idea that his involvement

with the prostitute Sien had led to this ailment. Thus, by employing the color blue in his painting, Van Gogh might also be alluding to the Akshobya Mantra as a way of expressing his hope to overcome all his sins and mistakes.

In Buddhism, the dark blue color is symbolized by the precious stone lapis lazuli, believed to possess healing properties and used to alleviate nervous conditions. Van Gogh's adept utilization of the dark blue color in the painting could be seen as an indication of his mental state, and his statement "good hope of getting over it" (Letter 776) hints at his yearning for recovery. Therefore, the inclusion of the dark blue color in this painting possibly signifies his aspiration to conquer his mental afflictions.

The dark blue sky is illuminated by eleven bright yellow stars and the moon. The yellow color can be interpreted in the context of Buddhism, representing the saffron robes worn by Buddhist monks. Initially, this color was worn by criminals, but Buddha chose it for the monks' robes to signify humility and detachment from the materialistic world. It symbolizes renunciation, humility, and lack of ambition. Here, Van Gogh employs this color to portray his desire to distance himself from the materialistic and illusory world that entangles him in relationships, love, and the harsh realities of life. Many of his paintings with religious themes emerged just prior to the years of his death, indicating his longing for a spiritual existence.

The significance of the number of stars, eleven stars, lies in the fact that in Buddhism, there exists a deity named Kannon, and he is depicted as Eleven-headed Kannon (see fig. 11). Kannon is a bodhisattva, an enlightened deity who symbolizes Buddhist wisdom and compassion. It is believed that Kannon remains in the world to help people find salvation. Van Gogh, by representing the eleven stars, might be

symbolizing the Eleven-headed Kannon with the belief that Kannon would help him find salvation.



Fig. 11. Kyosuke Sasaki, “Eleven-headed Kannon”, 12th century, Nara National Museum, Japan.

The crescent moon painted in *The Starry Night* resembles the symbol of Buddhism, the stupa overhung with a crescent (see fig. 12). The crescent shape symbolizes the element of air. When the crescent is placed horizontally, it resembles a half-moon and takes on the appearance of a bowl. Thus, it serves as a receptacle destined to receive a sacred deposit. While it is clearly stated that the painting *The Starry Night* depicts scenes from Saint-Rémy, which Van Gogh observed through his asylum window, the time when Van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* was not during the crescent moon phase; rather, it was three-quarters full. Van Gogh absorbed the night scene of Saint-

Rémy and deliberately avoided depicting the moon's accurate shape of that time, instead portraying a crescent moon ("Van Gogh's Starry Night: A History of Matter and a Matter of History"). By taking the liberty of not precisely rendering what he saw, Van Gogh was expressing his own emotions through this painting.



Fig. 12. "Buddhist Stupa Overhung with a Crescent Moon", 19th century, Gilt bronze with painted image, World Museum, Liverpool.

According to Van Gogh, true artists do not merely replicate what they see; they examine and analyze their subjects before painting, capturing how they feel about those subjects and expressing their emotions with alterations and inaccuracies. In a letter to Theo, Van Gogh wrote:

. . . in my view Millet and Lhermitte are consequently the true painters, because they don't paint things as they *are*, examined drily and analytically, but as *they*, Millet, Lhermitte, Michelangelo, feel them. Tell him that my great desire is to learn to make such inaccuracies, such

variations, reworkings, alterations of the reality, that it might become, very well – lies if you will – but – truer than the literal truth”. (Letter 515)

Therefore, the crescent moon's shape could be interpreted as a symbol representing the emotions he experienced while creating this painting. Given his admiration for Buddhism, the crescent moon could be likened to the crescent moon depicted in the Buddhist stupa. Thus, the crescent moon in the painting could be interpreted as representing himself or his mind as a bowl or receptacle for the sacred deposit he seeks from God.

While reading the Buddhist lines, yellow-colored stars and the moon can be connected to the yellow-bodied Buddha, Ratnasambhava (see fig. 13). In this context, Ratnasambhava transmutes pride into the wisdom of sameness or equality.



Fig. 13. Hōshō Nyorai, “Ratnasambhava”, *Foundations of Buddhism*.

Being a failed artist who was not accepted by the art world, he always longs to attain the artistic fame he dreamt of. Van Gogh mentioned in one of his letters that the color yellow has the power to charm God. So, through the use of the yellow color in his paintings, Van Gogh might have aimed to charm God, which could be interpreted in line with the representation of the yellow-bodied Buddha. Thus, by employing the yellow color, Van Gogh could have been symbolizing his yearning for recognition and equality among other artists.

The Varada mudra of Ratnasambhava Buddha symbolizes charity, compassion, and the granting of boons. It signifies the fulfillment of the aspiration to dedicate oneself to the salvation of humanity. As stated in *At Eternity's Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent van Gogh* by Kathleen Powers Erickson, Van Gogh loves to follow the lives of ancient saints who emphasize the practice of selfless charity. This is evident from his time in Borinage and Nuenen, where he led a selfless life. In Buddhism, the act of giving without expecting anything in return is a means of practicing selflessness, demonstrating kindness and compassion. By highlighting the yellow-colored Buddha with the Varada Mudra, the use of the yellow color in Van Gogh's paintings could be connected to his life in Borinage as an evangelist. Van Gogh willingly sacrificed and gave away everything he had to the impoverished miners of Borinage. However, this selfless act led to his dismissal from his position. The church, which had provisionally appointed him in Borinage, terminated his contract due to his empathetic approach to peasants, a practice not endorsed by the pastors of that time.

Van Gogh endeavored to align himself with God and seek deliverance from original sin. He yearned for salvation, a form of escape from all his transgressions. To

serve God, he initially pursued the path of an evangelist. Later, when rejected by the Church, he embarked on a second path, seeking salvation through his art.

In the center of the painting, Van Gogh depicted the sky with a swirling mass of clouds resembling the Oriental Yin and Yang symbol (see fig. 14), well-known in Chinese philosophy. The Chinese Yin and Yang symbol (see fig. 15) represents the harmonious balance between opposing yet complementary forces inherent in the universe. In Buddhism, the Yin and Yang symbol enclosed within a legendary lotus signifies the sacred seat of the Buddha, denoting purity and perfection. With Yin and Yang at the center, combined with the sacred lotus, a perfect focal point is created for the body, mind, and spirit. Van Gogh too aspired for such equilibrium in his life. Struggling with his mental instability, he was perpetually entangled in the darker aspects of his existence, preventing him from achieving a balanced mind and body. His emotions, mind, and spirit remained askew. Van Gogh perpetually yearned for a normal life, one where he could find a tranquil place for himself, similar to how Buddha positions himself at the center of the Lotus Yin and Yang – a place of absolute completeness attained through personal equilibrium.



Fig. 14. "Starry Night with Yin and Yang Symbol", *The Vincent van Gogh Gallery*.



Fig. 15. Stefen Jaegar, "Yin – Yang", *Research Gate*.

"*Cypressus cashmeriana*," commonly called Bhutan cypress, Kashmir cypress, or Weeping cypress, belongs to the cypress species. Cypress trees have long been associated

with Buddhist religious places and have been planted around Vihara monasteries and Buddhist temples for centuries. Thus, cypress trees hold great spiritual significance. The towering cypress tree that seems to touch the sky also appears in *The Starry Night* painting, symbolizing the connection between earth and heaven. For Van Gogh, the cypress tree serves as a path guiding him from earth to heaven, a way to reach God. Since his younger days, he had dreamt of forging a connection with God, attempting various jobs that he hoped would lead him to a spiritual path. However, he did not find success in any of these endeavors. Consequently, he turned to paintings as a means to bridge the gap between himself and God. The cypress tree became a symbol of the link he had always yearned for, a conduit that would carry him to the path of heaven.

Believing that cypress trees planted around Buddhist temples and monasteries establish a connection with God, Van Gogh incorporated the image of the cypress tree into his painting. The beauty and color of cypress trees consistently captivated Van Gogh. In a letter to Theo, he expressed his fascination with them, saying, “The cypresses still preoccupy me, I’d like to do something with them like the canvases of the sunflowers because it astonishes me that no one has yet done them as I see them. It’s beautiful as regards lines and proportions, like an Egyptian obelisk. And the green has such a distinguished quality” (Letter 783). An Egyptian obelisk is a revered monument erected to honor the deceased or to pay homage to God. By likening cypress trees to an Egyptian obelisk, Van Gogh draws a connection between cypresses and God. In placing the cypress tree prominently in the foreground, ahead of other images, Van Gogh likely intended to symbolize that divine power would safeguard and watch over him, much like cypress trees protect Buddhist monasteries.

In *The Starry Night*, the cypress tree is depicted in black and dark green colors. In Buddhist philosophy, the color green signifies action. Therefore, the green cypress tree in the painting can be interpreted as a representation of the green-bodied Buddha, Amoghasiddhi (see fig. 16).



Fig. 16. “Amoghasiddhi”, *Buddhism Red Zambala*.

Amoghasiddhi, the 'Almighty Conqueror' or 'He who Unerringly Achieves his Goal', transforms jealousy into the wisdom of accomplishment. Van Gogh believed that through action, karma, he would be able to succeed in his life. Even though everyone labeled him as a failure in his career and life, he kept on working to reach triumph. Through his karma, he was able to achieve the fame he always dreamt of, even after his

death. By analyzing the green-colored cypress in the painting, it could be interpreted that Van Gogh might be following the thoughts of Amoghasiddhi, who insists on transforming the poison of envy into accomplishment through one's actions. Like a cypress tree, he tried to overcome the poison of envy, the challenges, and obstacles he confronted in his life, to reach his goal of becoming a great artist through hard work.

Van Gogh always wanted to be a "simple worshipper of the eternal Buddha" (Letter 695) and had "good hope of getting over it" (Letter 776), his mental trauma. So by using the green color cypress, he might be showing his hope to overcome his mental trauma, which is one of the most important challenges in his life. And Amoghasiddhi is showing the gesture of Abhaya mudra (see fig. 17), symbolizing fearlessness and protection. Thus, showing the symbol of protection Van Gogh wanted to show through the green color cypress.



Fig. 17. "Abhaya Mudra", *Prana Sutra*.

As mentioned in *The Hidden Rainbow* by Kelly Dorji, the color black in Buddhism symbolizes the darkness of hate and ignorance, and by meditating upon this, it helps in awakening clarity and truth. The negative quality of hate is transformed into the wisdom of compassion. According to William J. Havlicek, Van Gogh thought of himself as a failure and started hating his life. Whenever he was caught in the darkness, he found haven in paintings (*Van Gogh's Untold Journey*). It was art that helped him find light in the darkness. So through paintings, he was able to find the other side of darkness and hate, the light of compassion and love. According to Van Gogh, creating paintings was the only thing that kept him alive, and he believed that paintings had the power to keep his mind and imagination calm. He wrote to Theo, "In short, looking at the painting should rest the mind, or rather, the imagination" (Letter 705).

The buildings painted in the center are depicted with small blocks of yellow, orange, and green, and there is also a dash of red color to the left side of the church. The color red in Buddhism is considered sacred. It is believed that the red color holds the power of protection and is often used in painting sacred buildings (*The Hidden Rainbow*). In the painting, the red color is applied to the left of the church, a sacred building, and it shows the protective nature of the sacred places where God abides. Yellow, being the color of the earth, symbolizes the rootedness and equanimity of the earth, and in Buddhism, it is a tradition that only prestigious monasteries or residences of eminent monks can be coated with the yellow color (*The Hidden Rainbow*). Some of the buildings and houses are painted yellow in this painting, and this could be taken as a reference to the monasteries and residences of Buddhist monks.

In 1888, during his Arles period of paintings, Van Gogh attempted to absorb the beauty of Arles and returned to his rural-themed artworks. *Iris* (1889) (see fig. 18) marks Van Gogh's initial painting after arriving at the St. Remy asylum. He crafted four paintings in the *Iris* series, each adorned with four distinct colors. The first and second *Iris* were created shortly after his arrival at Saint-Remy. The third and fourth paintings in this series emerged a year later, focusing on the still-life portrayal of cut flowers in vases.



Fig. 18. Vincent van Gogh, *Iris*, 1889, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

The first one, *Iris* (1889), is dominated by a purple hue with a single white blossom. The second painting, *The Iris* (1889) (see fig. 19), depicts a smaller cluster of flowers with just a single blossom. The third, *Iris* (1890) (see fig. 20), showcases

purple-colored flowers, while the fourth, *Iris* (1890) (see fig. 21), features a vibrant yellow background complemented by purple tones. In the painting *Field with Irises near Arles* (see fig. 22), he incorporated the stunning visuals of Arles into the canvas by positioning the Irises flowers in the foreground.



Fig. 19. Vincent van Gogh, *The Iris*, 1889, National Gallery of Canada, Canada.



Fig. 20. Vincent van Gogh, *Iris*, 1890, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 21. Vincent van Gogh, *Iris*, 1890, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 22. Vincent van Gogh, *Field with Irises near Arles*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The history of the Iris flower opens a window to the mythical realm of classical Greece. The word 'Iris' in Greek translates simply to 'rainbow' and 'eiris' signifies a messenger. As the Iris flower comes in various colors, resembling the hues of a rainbow, its name is fitting. According to Greek mythology, Iris is the Greek Goddess who conveys messages between Gods. She is known as the Goddess of the rainbow due to her role as the messenger of the sky and sea, utilizing the arc of the rainbow to traverse between heaven and earth. Greek tradition holds that planting Irises on the graves of loved ones enables them to transcend to the afterlife, carried by Iris as a messenger from earth to heaven.

As noted by Francis V. Tisco in the book *Rainbow Body and Resurrection: Spiritual Attainment, the Dissolution of the Material Body, and the Case of Khenpo a Choe*, Buddhism teaches that specific meditation practices can result in the transformation of the body into five radiant lights, referred to as the 'rainbow body' (see fig. 23). The concept of the rainbow body traces back to the 8th-century Buddhist master Padmasambhava, who achieved a state of deathlessness. In the phenomenon of the rainbow body, practitioners near death experience the clear light through practices like Tögal or 'Direct Crossing,' with this pure light stemming from the dissolution of the physical body, serving as the foundation of consciousness.



Fig. 23. Asa Hershoff, "Rainbow Body," *Buddhistdoor Global*.

Hence, the meaning of the word 'Iris' in Greek mythology, signifying 'rainbow,' echoes the concept of the Buddhist rainbow body. Van Gogh, deeply influenced by Buddhist ideals and self-identifying as a follower of Buddha (Letter 695), might have been influenced by the rainbow body concept. Van Gogh consistently labeled himself as an "anxious soul" (Letter RM20) and sought to manage his inner turmoil. He wrote to Theo, ". . . I have enough trouble sticking it out and possessing my soul in patience . . ." (Letter 472). In his troubled life, Van Gogh was preoccupied with achieving peace for his soul, especially in death. He expressed "faith in immortality" (Letter 109) and aspired to a legendary demise where only his body would perish, similar to the rainbow body in Buddhism. Van Gogh's desire for a connection with the divine is evident in his letter to Theo, , "Let us also pray that we may become rich in God" (Letter 49), as he hoped for an "everlasting life" (Letter 49). Through the Irises series, Van Gogh might have aimed to establish a spiritual connection with God, akin to the Iris flower—a rainbow Goddess conveying messages from earth to heaven, transcending the afterlife. Thus, the Irises painting series could be seen as a reference to the rainbow body concept.

In Buddhism, constructing bridges (sankama or setu) is considered a meritorious deed that encourages people to build them for the public good wherever needed. In the Tipitaka, a Buddhist scripture, crossing a river is used as a metaphor for spiritual endeavor. Buddhists believe that by building bridges, they not only assist people in reaching their physical destinations but also provide a pathway to their spiritual destination. Thus, in line with the Buddha's teachings, numerous monks and kings undertook the construction of bridges. In China and Japan, building bridges is even integrated into religious practices. The virtues of bridge-building are explicitly mentioned

in the *Mahāyāna sūtras*. For instance, the *Sarvagunapunyaśhetra sūtra* references the seven 'fields of merit', with the fourth being “maintaining ferries to help people across rivers”, and the fifth being “constructing bridges so that the ill and weak can cross rivers” (Kieschnick).

From these references, it is evident that early Buddhist followers indeed encouraged bridge construction. Vincent van Gogh also depicted bridges in his paintings, influenced by Japanese art. Therefore, the emphasis on bridge paintings could be attributed to the influence of Buddhism on him. His paintings from 1887 and 1888, such as *Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)* (1887) (see fig. 24), *Langlois Bridge at Arles* series of 1888 which include *The Langlois Bridge* (March) (see fig. 25), *Langlois Bridge at Arles with Women Washing* (April) (see fig. 26), *Langlois Bridge at Arles* (April) (see fig. 27), *The Drawbridge* (May) (see fig. 28), *Trinquetaille Bridge in Arles* (see fig. 29), and *The Gleize Bridge over the Vigueirat Canal* (see fig. 30), portray the images of bridges.



Fig. 24. Vincent van Gogh, *Bridge in the Rain (after Hiroshige)*, 1887, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 25. Vincent van Gogh, *The Langlois Bridge*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 26. Vincent van Gogh, *Langlois Bridge at Arles with Women Washing*, 1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.



Fig. 27. Vincent van Gogh, *Langlois Bridge at Arles*, 1888, Private Collection, Paris.



Fig. 28. Vincent van Gogh, *The Drawbridge*, 1888, Wallraf – Richartz Museum, Germany.



Fig. 29. Vincent van Gogh, *Trinquetaille Bridge in Arles*, 1888, Private Collection.



Fig. 30. Vincent van Gogh, *The Gleize Bridge over the Vigueirat Canal*, 1888, Pola Museum of Art, Hakone.

In the paintings shown above, it is evident that in certain pieces, Van Gogh incorporated the depiction of boats on a river, reminiscent of the 'Raft Parable of Buddha' (also known as the 'Parable of the Ferryboat'). The Raft Parable of Buddha is recounted in the 'Alagaddupama Sutta' (Water Snake Simile) within the 'Sutta-Pitaka' (*Majjhima Nikaya* 22). According to Buddha's parable, a man desired to traverse a river due to deeming the shore he occupied perilous and insecure. He perceived the opposite shore as safe and comfortable. To achieve this, he constructed a raft employing materials at hand, utilizing it to reach the opposite bank. However, he became uncertain whether he should convey the raft with him thereafter. Addressing this quandary to his disciples, to whom he related the narrative, Buddha eventually responded, asserting that he need not transport the raft. Its sole purpose was to convey him to the adjacent shore, and having

fulfilled this function, it should be abandoned. Buddha sought to illustrate that the raft symbolized the dharma of practice, while the secure distant shore represented Enlightenment. The man's sole objective was to attain the Enlightenment shore, and upon arriving, he intended to forsake the raft – a mere conduit to his aspiration. According to Buddha, his teachings paralleled the raft, transporting those aspiring to embrace Nirvana in their existence. Once the spiritual doctrines had served their intent, the raft was to be cast aside.

In these paintings (excluding *Bridge in the Rain [after Hiroshige]*), images of ferry boats rest unoccupied by passengers on a shoreline. Van Gogh once likened his artistic pursuits to a “little boat in a disaster when the big ship is lost” (Letter 524), aspiring for this boat to navigate him to the opposite shore, thereby surmounting his apprehensions and apprehensions of failure. In a missive to Theo, Van Gogh wrote, “. . . little boat in good condition and ready to sail, whether the storm comes or my anxiety proves to be unfounded” (Letter 524). Consequently, as an individual persistently yearning for spiritual fulfillment, Van Gogh conceivably rendered these bridges to manifest his spiritual aspirations, thereby reflecting his Buddhist convictions. Conversely, the small boat or raft within the artworks might allude to his pronouncement in Letter 524, where he seemingly envisioned sailing away from anxieties towards a prosperous life.

The series of Sower paintings by Van Gogh, created in 1888 and 1889, *The Sower* (June) (see fig. 31), *The Sower: Outskirts of Arles in the Background* (September) (see fig. 32), *The Sower* (October) (see fig. 33), *The Sower* (November) (see fig. 34), *The Sower* (November) (see fig. 35), *Sower (after Millet)* (late October) (see fig. 36) and

Sower (after Millet) (October – November) (see fig. 37), are often interpreted within the context of Christian sower parables. However, these paintings were created under the influence of Japonaiserie and Buddhism in his life, thus providing an additional lens through which to view them, in the light of Buddhism.



Fig. 31. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

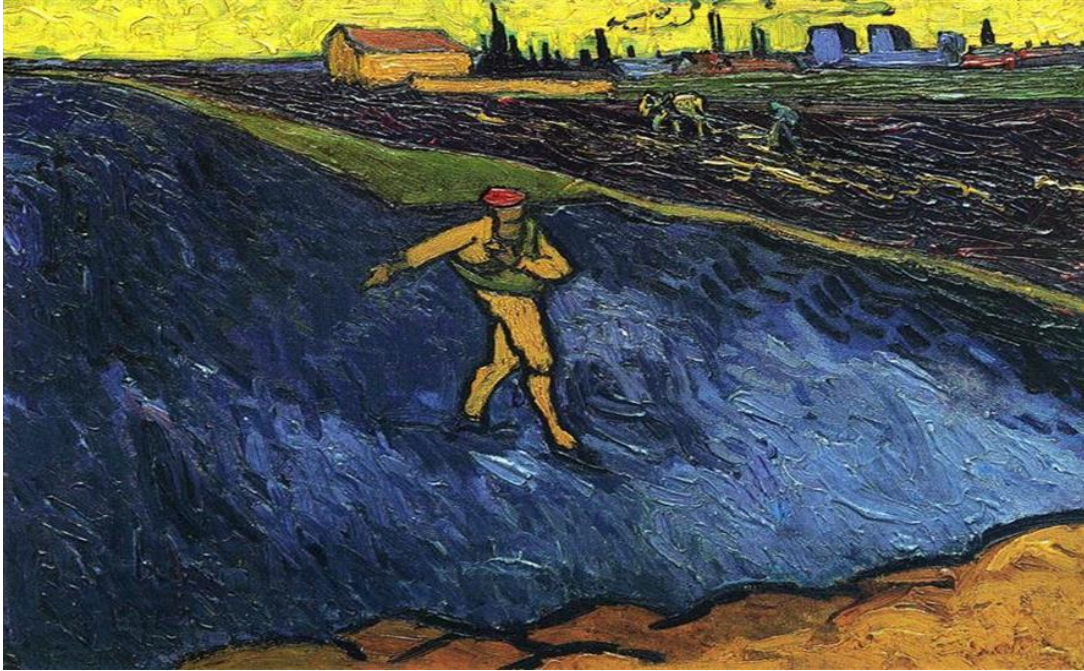


Fig. 32. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower: Outskirts of Arles in the Background*, 1888, The Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

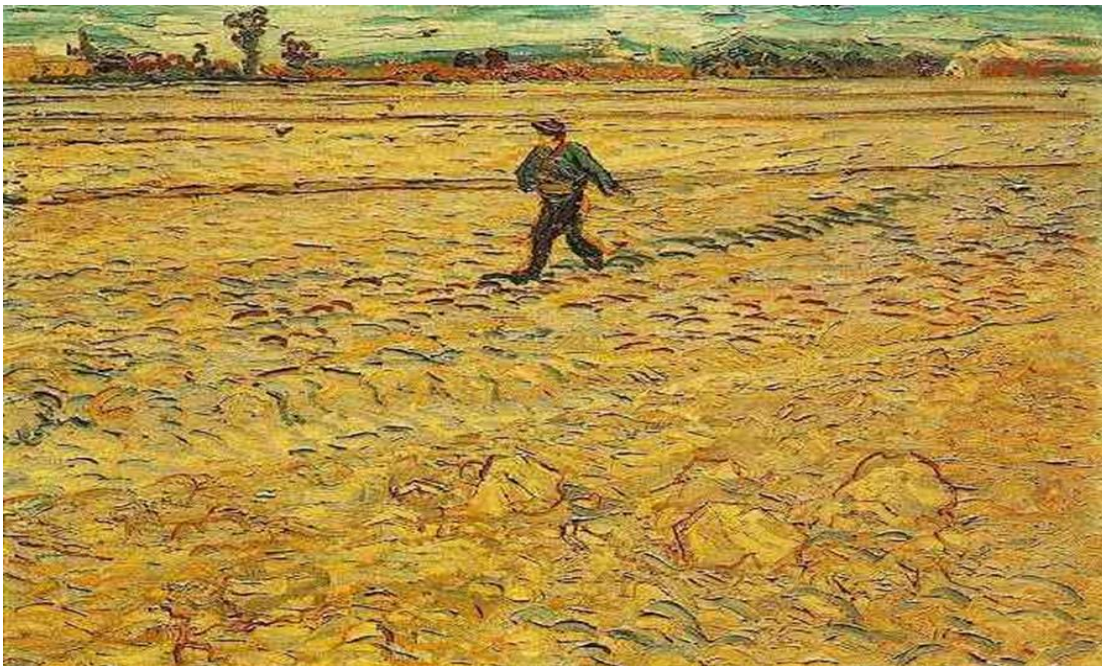


Fig. 33. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Villa Flora, Winterthur.



Fig. 34. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

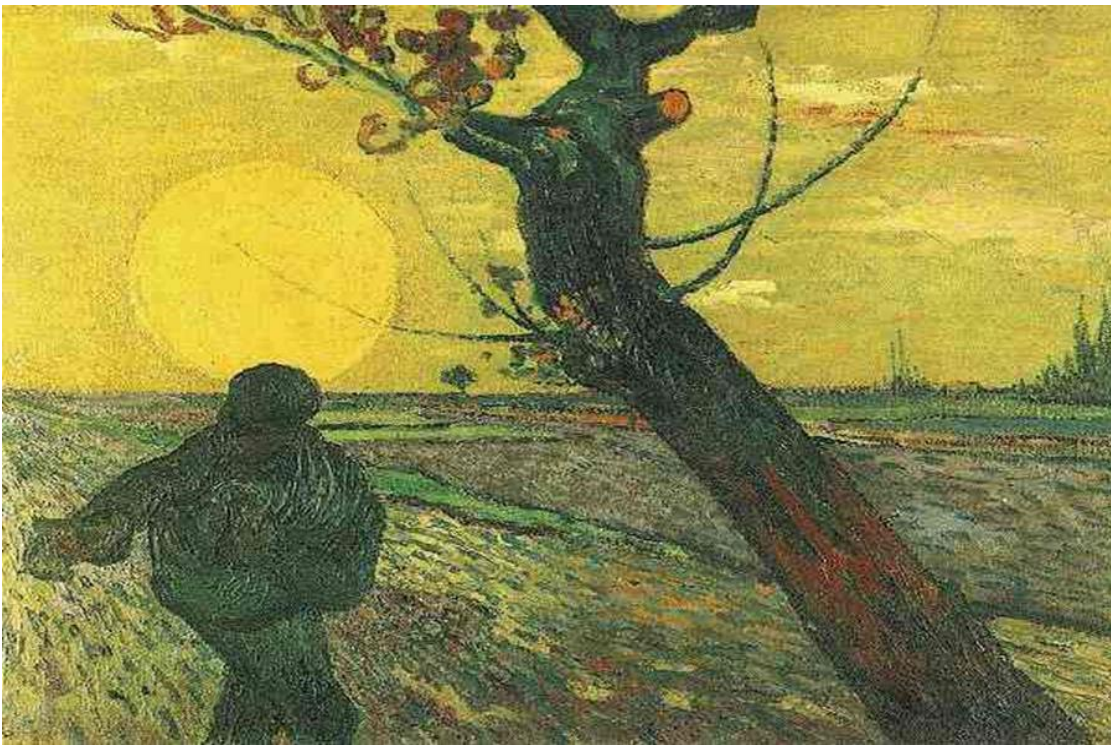


Fig. 35. Vincent van Gogh, *The Sower*, 1888, Foundation E.G. Bührle, Zurich.

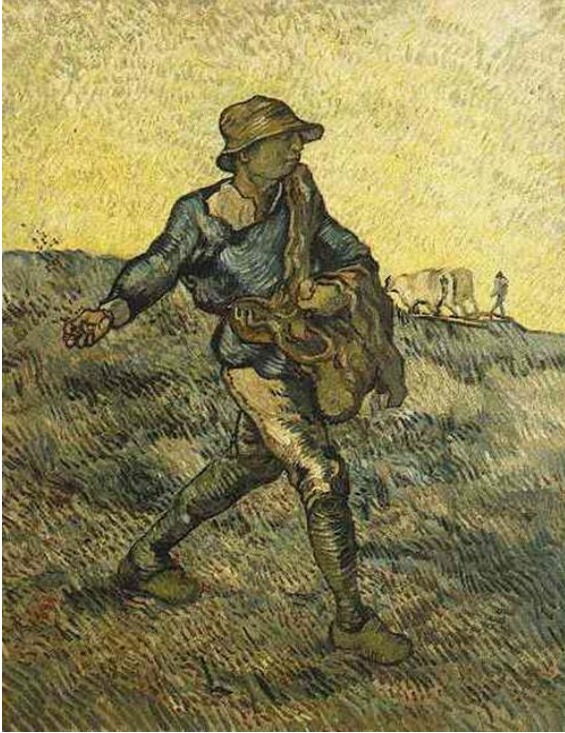


Fig. 36. Vincent van Gogh, *Sower (after Millet)*, 1889, Private collection.

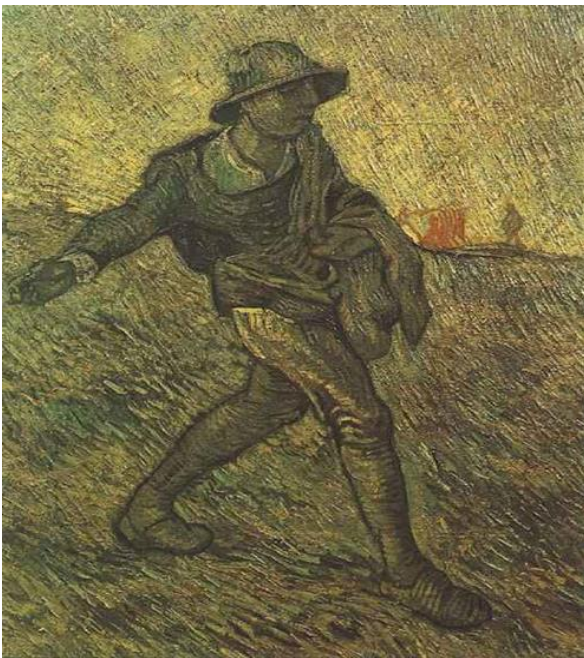


Fig. 37. Vincent van Gogh, *Sower (after Millet)*, 1889, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Sowing, maturing, and harvesting are the three-phase processes suggested by Buddha that help a person attain Buddhahood. T'ien-t'ai (also known as Chih-i) is the

founder of the T'ien-t'ai school in China, and in his book *The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*, T'ien-t'ai compared the concept of growing a plant with the attainment of Buddhahood. In the Lotus Sutra, it is mentioned that the first stage is sowing, where Buddha, like a gardener, plants the seeds of Buddhahood in the lives of the people (*The Words and Phrases of the Lotus Sutra*). In the book *The Essentials for Attaining Buddhahood*, Nichiren Daishonin, a Japanese Buddhist monk of the 13th century, also depicted Buddha as a sower who sows the seeds of Buddhahood in the minds of people and nurtures their growth until the sown seeds are ready for harvest, to attain the enlightenment of Buddhahood. In *The Essentials for Attaining Buddhahood*, Nichiren Daishonin said, "The Lotus Sutra is like the seed, the Buddha like the sower, and the people like the field" (748). These extracts from the books of the Buddhist monks themselves show that Buddha was like a sower who sows the faith of Buddhism in the fertile minds of people who welcome enlightenment. Hence, the sower paintings of Van Gogh could be related to the sower examples mentioned in Buddhism.

With the examples of paintings shown in this chapter, it is clear that Van Gogh was influenced by the divine and spiritual elements of Buddhism. The paintings selected for the study explain how Van Gogh used his divine and spiritual thoughts about Buddhism in his work.

In conclusion, Vincent Van Gogh's art was a testament to his exceptional talent and unique artistic style. His magical hands wielded bright colors, thick brush strokes, and thick paint on canvases with well-defined structures and forms. Thus, this chapter shows how Van Gogh found a powerful medium to convey his ideas on spirituality and divinity through his Post-Impressionist art techniques.

Van Gogh's paintings were more than mere representations; they were windows into his own experiences, infused with rich symbolism and religious imagery. By harnessing spiritual and religious imagery in his work, this chapter demonstrates how Van Gogh succeeded in expressing his profound spiritual thoughts and leaving an enduring mark on the world of art. By analyzing the Christian and Buddhist religious imagery used by Van Gogh in his paintings, this chapter showcases how his masterpieces captivate and inspire, inviting viewers to delve into the depths of his innermost spiritual experiences.

Chapter IV

The Social Activist Embracing Spirituality: Van Gogh's Artistic Portrayals of Women's Divine and Spiritual Essence

Vincent van Gogh was not only an artist but also a social activist, employing art as a tool to advocate for the rights of impoverished individuals within society. He directed his attention towards the most oppressed segment of society, namely peasants, particularly focusing on peasant women and prostitutes who endured dual layers of oppression. His aspiration had always been to serve the lower-class citizens in society. In a letter to his brother Theo, he expressed, "Once I am master of my pencil or of watercolour or of etching, I can return to the region of the miners or weavers, to do things better from life than thus far" (Letter 159). Consequently, he utilized art as a medium to convey his perspectives on women. He perceived women as bearers of the divine feminine, a concept rooted in numerous spiritual traditions.

Van Gogh firmly believed that women possessed a distinct connection to the spiritual realm, with the potential to contribute to a more harmonious world. Driven by his profound spiritual and divine ideology, this chapter delves into Van Gogh's portrayal of women in his paintings, examining them from both a religious and spiritual standpoint. Furthermore, it conducts an analysis of the presence of spirituality and divinity in Van Gogh's life and artistic endeavors. The women depicted in Van Gogh's paintings are scrutinized in the context of Christianity, the religion to which he adhered, ultimately presenting Van Gogh as a social activist who harnessed his religious and spiritual convictions to advocate for women's rights.

Vincent van Gogh earned the label of a peasant painter, dedicated to representing the marginalized peasantry within society. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

When I say that I'm a peasant painter, that is really so, and will become clearer to you in future; I feel at home there. And it's not for nothing that I've spent so many evenings sitting pondering by the fire with the miners and the peat-cutters and the weavers and peasants here — unless I had no time to think — because of the work. I've become so absorbed in peasant life by continually seeing it at all hours of the day that I really hardly ever think of anything else. (Letter 493)

As noted in the article "Vincent van Gogh: On the Road to Revolution", "In his letters to Theo, he names himself a 'painter of peasant life' mainly because he saw everyone, including himself, as peasants tilling the earth as if it were a fief run by an absent overlord" (Kean). Literature also played a significant role in Van Gogh's life, inspiring him to work for the poor peasants. Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885), the story about the coal-mining region of France, is one among those that impressed Van Gogh, urging him to make a social impact through his art. This influence is evident in Van Gogh's paintings, such as *The Weavers* and *The Potato Eaters*.

After his failed careers as an art dealer and an evangelist, Van Gogh decided to shift his focus to art. For him, art was another means of conveying his ideologies and beliefs. Despite being a failed evangelist, he retained the determination to work for the poor and bring light to their lives. Additionally, as a struggling artist who couldn't afford models for his paintings, he began studying in detail and creating artworks featuring impoverished laborers like weavers, sowers, miners, and diggers. He believed that the

souls of the poor were devoid of artificial decorations. He chose dull colors and earth tones to depict the realistic faces of these laborers and the hardships they faced, establishing himself as a painter of the peasantry.

Women constitute the most vibrant segment but are often relegated to a place where the most insignificant humans are positioned. Among the women who faced double oppression from society, prostitutes were at the forefront, followed by lower-class peasant women. Neither of these groups received dignity nor respect. Across various religions, women are often depicted as secondary to men. As stated in *Women and Religion: A Sociological Analysis*, “In most of these legends, women are seen as sexually alluring, curious, gullible and insatiable” (Renavikar 35). However, Van Gogh was a feminist who advocated for the rights of women enduring double oppression – those of low class and prostitutes. In his roles as an artist and an evangelist, Van Gogh found himself drawn to prostitutes and peasant women. In a letter to Theo, he wrote, “It’s not the first time I couldn’t resist that feeling of affection, particularly love and affection for those women whom the clergymen damn so and superciliously despise and condemn from the pulpit. I do not damn them, I do not condemn them, I do not despise them” (Letter 193).

Thus, he wasn't merely a painter of peasants; he was an artist who advocated for oppressed women in society. He consistently held respect for women. In an October 1884 letter addressed to his brother Theo, Vincent van Gogh wrote, “To the one party, woman is always heresy and diabolical. To me, the opposite” (Letter 464). This statement itself reveals his attitude towards women, showing that differences in wealth, class, race, or social status did not impact his feelings of love and admiration for them:

But it's not only recently that I've grown fond of those women who are condemned and despised and cursed by clergymen, my love for them is even somewhat older than my love for Kee Vos. Whenever I walked down the street – often all alone and at loose ends, half sick and destitute, with no money in my pocket – I looked at them and envied the people who could go off with her, and I felt as though those poor girls were my sisters, as far as our circumstances and experience of life were concerned. And, you see, that feeling is old and deeply rooted in me. Even as a boy I sometimes looked up with endless sympathy and respect into a half-withered female face on which it was written, as it were: life and reality have given me a drubbing. (Letter 193)

Van Gogh was very kind towards women; he tried to give them a significant place in his life and art. While women have often been treated as the secondary sex in various aspects, Van Gogh viewed them differently—with love and empathy. As a result, he created numerous drawings and paintings featuring peasant women, as well as the prostitute Sien. Through his artworks depicting peasant women and Sien with religious imagery, he conveyed his spiritual and divine contemplations about women and attempted to carve out a space for marginalized women in society. Therefore, this analysis delves into Van Gogh's selected paintings, interpreting them in the context of biblical imagery and allusions, to underscore the societal importance of women.

In this context, the religious imageries employed by Van Gogh serve as a protective shield, shielding women from the scorching sun of patriarchy and the deeply ingrained patriarchal notions prevalent in society. Consequently, Van Gogh emerges as a

social activist who advocates for women's rights by channeling his spiritual reflections rooted in Christianity through his artistic creations.

Vincent van Gogh believed that both becoming an evangelist and an artist are challenging pursuits, demanding a deep understanding, sympathy, and empathy towards humanity. For him, cultivating empathy for the less privileged segments of society was a fundamental prerequisite for becoming a skilled artist imbued with evangelist qualities. Hence, when he encountered an abandoned pregnant prostitute with a child, he made the radical decision to provide her with care, shelter, food, and protection. He began cohabitating with the prostitute Clarissa Maria Hoornik, commonly known as Sien, and used her as a model for his paintings.

His intentions extended beyond artistic pursuits; they were underpinned by an evangelist's desire to fulfill the responsibility of identifying with the destitute. In a letter to Theo dated 19th July 1882, he expressed, "We are chained and tied to each other by a strong bond of sincere affection" (Letter 248). Sien was not just a subject for his art but a means to fulfill his evangelistic calling, encompassing care for the impoverished. Van Gogh considered himself a protector, aiming to shield Sien through the dual power of art and religion, much like an umbrella. His Christian beliefs and the inspiration drawn from the examples of traditional saints propelled him to selflessly aid those in need, even if it meant sacrificing everything. He advocated for others to examine the struggles of marginalized individuals and stand as their saviors. In one of his letters to Theo concerning Sien, he wrote, "I see in her a woman, I see in her a mother, and I believe any man who is at all manly must protect such a one if there's an opportunity to do something. I've never been ashamed of it, nor shall I be ashamed of it" (Letter 416).

Despite facing criticism from his family, friends, and relatives for his continued relationship with Sien, Van Gogh remained resolute. He also shielded her from her own family's judgments and the censure of religious institutions that sought to impose moral standards. Van Gogh wrote to Theo,

I fear for her that the old religion will numb and freeze her again with that damned icy coldness that has already shattered her once in the distant past to the point of death, long years ago. Oh - I'm no friend of present-day Christianity, even though the founder was sublime - I've seen through present-day Christianity only too well. It mesmerized me, that icy coldness in my youth - but I've had my revenge since then. How? By worshipping the love that they - the theologians - call sin, by respecting a whore etc., and not many would-be respectable, religious ladies. (Letter 464)

In his letter to Theo, Van Gogh wrote, "The poor creature has suffered appallingly. And yet there's still a zest for life and sensitivity in her that has not been extinguished" (Letter 248). He endeavored to imbue the essence of Sien's life and pain into his colors, expressing them on canvases for the world to behold. Following his departure from his church job, his sole means of communication became letters and paintings. Consequently, he embarked on an artistic series centered around Sien, commencing with a portrait of her. *Sorrow* (1882) (see fig. 1) marks the forefront of this series, a creation he mentioned in a letter to his brother Theo on April 10, 1882. Discussing *Sorrow*, Van Gogh wrote, "This isn't the study from the model and yet it's directly from the model" (Letter 216).

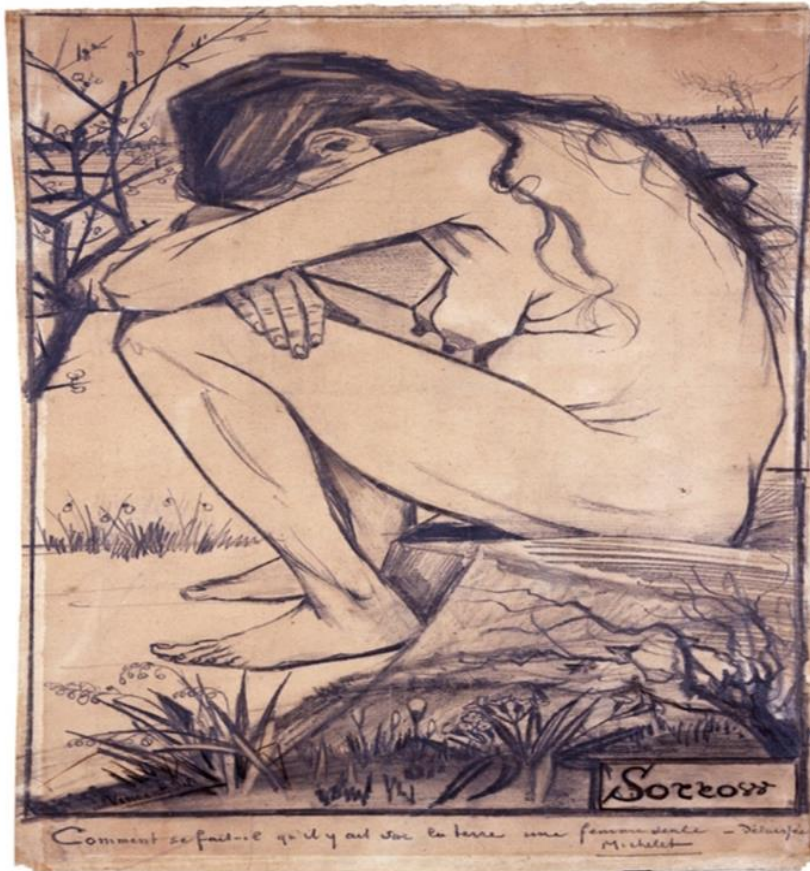


Fig. 1. Vincent van Gogh, *Sorrow*, 1882, The New Art Gallery Walsall, England.

In the forefront of the drawing, it's evident that Van Gogh sketched spring flowers, further corroborating the date provided in the letter. He himself drew parallels between the portrayal of *Sorrow* and his watercolor piece *Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground* (*Les racines*) (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Vincent van Gogh, *Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground (Les racines)*, 1882, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Van Gogh juxtaposed the slender figure of Sien, depicted in *Sorrow*, whose soul bled and bore the scars of life, with the ancient trees in *Les racines*, marked by the ravages of nature. An excerpt from Van Gogh's letter to Theo, penned on May 1st, 1882, substantiates the aforementioned comparison:

I've now finished two larger drawings. First of all, *Sorrow*, but in a larger format, the figure alone without surroundings. . . And the figure has been drawn with more care. The other one, '*Roots*', is some tree roots in sandy ground. I've tried to imbue the landscape with the same sentiment as the

figure. Frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm. I wanted to express something of life's struggle, both in that white, slender female figure and in those gnarled black roots with their knots. Or rather, because I tried without any philosophizing to be true to nature, which I had before me, something of that great struggle has come into both of them almost inadvertently. At least it seemed to me that there was some sentiment in it, . . . (Letter 222)

From his letter, it is evident that both the white woman figure portrayed in "Sorrow" and the black roots of the tree painted in *Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground* were struggling to survive. Both of them were thrown into the deep pit of darkness and sorrow and were tied to the evil hands of poverty. Van Gogh, being a person who advocates for women's rights, compares the woman in the painting, Sien, to the tree roots. Thus, the idea of eco-feminism takes root here.

The term 'Ecofeminism' was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. It called for women to take initiative for the ecological revolution aimed at saving the planet. They believed that this ecological revolution would create a rapport between women and men, establish new gender relations, and foster a connection between humans and nature. In the 1970s, eco-feminist theory was not developed as a coherent body; it primarily explained the interconnection between the domination of women and nature. The historical context merely shows the Western connection between women and nature, and nothing more. In 1980, the U.S. witnessed a new development in the field of ecofeminism, where cultural feminists aimed to save both women and nature from exploitation, arguing that both could be liberated together.

Nature and women have always had a bond between them. In the artworks *Sorrow* and *Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground (Les racines)*, while dealing with ecofeminism, nature takes the shape of a woman and tells the story of the age-old concept of patriarchy and male dominance. Both are constantly exploited; being human or nature does not make a difference. Here, Van Gogh's watercolor work depicts ancient trees, and the drawing *Sorrow* portrays a young mourning woman. These two images depict contrasting characters, one being old and the other young, yet they are also parallel in their theme of exploitation and the time of production.

The age-old trees represent the older women's community, and Sien is the representative of the younger women's generation, both marred by the cruelties and atrocities of male chauvinists. Sien's nudity is not celebrated but rather reflective of her circumstances. The portrayal of spring in the drawing contrasts with the nude woman; spring is adorned with blooming flowers, while the woman lacks any decorations, even clothes. This picture illustrates the situation of prostitutes in society. Even as the season brings forth the spark of life in nature, these women never get a chance to enjoy life in its fullness.

Van Gogh imparts his spiritual thoughts through his artwork, *Sorrow*. In the painting, spring flowers are drawn in the foreground. Spring flowers symbolize the spring season and are connected to the idea of spirituality, leading to the concept of spiritual seasons. As Evon Horton mentioned in the book *Spiritual Seasons: Discerning and Flourishing in Every Season of Life*, spiritual seasons explain the natural seasons and their relation to human life in terms of religion and spirituality. Ecclesiastes 3:1 teaches in the Bible that "To everything there is a season." When spring is explained in terms of

spiritual promise, it signifies new beginnings. Spring allows people to experience divine energy, feeling the Almighty's presence and power in full bloom. It's a time to shed the old life of depression and barrenness, turning wastelands into fertile ground by planting the seeds of new life with spirituality. So, even though Van Gogh's drawing is bleak, he tries to leave a spark of hope and a promise to restore the beauty of life, with the spring flowers drawn in the foreground. He might be conveying the message that these flowers are not merely seasonal; they represent flowers from the divine spirit achievable in life by following the path of God, a form of spiritual renewal.

At the bottom of the drawing *Sorrow*, Van Gogh included a quote from the social historian Jules Michelet's book *La Femme* “*comment se fait-il qu'il y ait sur la terre une femme seule, de'laisseē?*” which translates to "How can there be on earth a woman alone, abandoned?" Van Gogh questions the entire social system and society that leave women to survive on their own instead of assisting them in living their own lives. He highlights that poverty and societal attitudes are the main problems leading to the exploitation and oppression of women. In one of his letters to Theo, Van Gogh mentioned his father's attitude towards Sien, providing an example of how mainstream society treats women from the lower class. Van Gogh wrote,

. . . Pa once said to me, ‘There's something immoral in a relationship with a woman of a lower class’ (I do not think this is true, since I see no *connection* between class and morality. *Class* is a matter for the world, morality is a matter for God). Also: ‘Do not sacrifice your position for a woman.’ Which in my view no longer applies when a human *life* is at

stake. Yet Pa himself is far from obstinate, and is often very reasonable.

(Letter 349)

Van Gogh protested against the discrimination faced by prostitutes through his work, aiming to depict Sien's richness through her spirituality. The woman's posture and expression in *Sorrow* suggest a prayerful or meditative stance, with a bowed head, possibly representing seeking solace from a divine source. In the drawing, the woman appears nude against a plain backdrop, emphasizing inner spiritual states over external appearances or material possessions.

The colors employed in the artwork contribute to its spiritual ambiance. The use of dark, somber hues like black and gray could symbolize the sorrow and mourning often intertwined with religious experiences. The downward diagonal lines in the background might symbolize descending into darkness or despair, but could also represent the path toward enlightenment or spiritual growth.

In the 1882 drawing *Sien with Umbrella and Prayer Book* (see fig. 3), Sien holds a prayer book. Van Gogh's letters to Theo make it clear that he aimed to play the role of a redeemer, intending to "protect" (Letter 416) Sien from her life as a prostitute. Similar to Jesus saving Mary Magdalene, Van Gogh sought to be a savior, rescuing a prostitute from a destructive life. Inspired by Jesus, Mary Magdalene transformed and became a devoted Christian. By portraying Sien with a prayer book, Van Gogh intended to convey Sien's embrace of a spiritual life, shedding her regrettable past. His affection and care aimed to integrate the marginalized prostitutes into society. As Van Gogh mentioned in his letter,

A woman changes when she loves and is loved; if there's no one who cares for them the drive and charm goes. It brings out what is in her, and her development most decidedly depends on this. ... So she now has a different look compared to last winter, her eyes are different, her gaze is now steady and calm, and there's an expression of happiness in her, of peace and rest, which is all the more striking because of course she's still in pain. (Letter 246)

The prayer book held by Sien represents her religious beliefs and her faith in God. The book is almost placed in the centre of the painting, indicating its importance. The umbrella held by Sien symbolizes protection and shelter, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for God's protection and shelter over his followers. The umbrella is also significant as it shields Sien from the rain, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for life's hardships and struggles that one must endure with the help of faith and spiritual guidance.

The overall sombre and muted colour palette of the painting may represent the artist's belief in the importance of simplicity and modesty in life. These depictions also echo Van Gogh's endorsement of faith, spirituality, and simplicity in life.



Fig. 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Sien with Umbrella and Prayer Book*, 1882, Private Collection, Japan.

Van Gogh placed women in the midst of the forest in three of his paintings, namely, *Girl in the Woods*, *Girl in White in the Woods*, and *Two Women in the Woods*, all painted in 1882. The depiction of young women in natural settings in all these paintings has the potential to evoke a sense of transcendence and connection to the divine. Van Gogh was trying to infuse the divine and spiritual elements within him into these paintings, representing the concept of nature as a manifestation of the divine. The lush greenery and serene settings suggest a connection between the natural world and a higher power. Thus, through these paintings, Van Gogh aimed to portray how women are connected to the divine power of nature.

The trees depicted in all three paintings could be interpreted in a religious context. Women amidst the trees allude to the beginning of mankind. According to Christian belief, Eve, tempted by the Serpent, ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and coerced Adam to do the same. This event marked the inception of humanity's original sin, as detailed in the story of the Garden of Eden. The trees surrounding the women in the paintings might serve as a reference to this incident, which laid the foundation for the creation of the universe and humankind. Trees hold significant symbolism throughout the Bible, from the tale of Adam and Eve to the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus' death on a tree bookends the Bible, which both starts and concludes with a tree. This juxtaposition underscores the trees' role in human history and redemption. The tree of knowledge represents the genesis of human sin, while another tree acts as a savior, allowing Jesus to bear mankind's sins for redemption. Genesis 3:1 alludes to the tree's connection with human sin, recounting Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. To quote from Genesis 3:1, "A tree was connected with man's sin. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil". Another pivotal tree played a role in the price of humanity's sin. At Calvary, Jesus Christ was crucified on a tree, emphasizing the profound significance of trees in the narrative of salvation. Thus, when Van Gogh situates women amidst the forest and surrounded by trees, he might be prompting contemplation on the sins women are often associated with and how trees symbolize salvation for them. However, society has historically attempted to marginalize women from attaining prominent positions by referencing religious legends. As articulated in the book *Women and Religion: A Sociological Analysis*,

The Biblical story of Adam and Eve is a classic example of the woman tempting the man to take the forbidden apple, thereby dooming them to live in a world of trouble and evil. The Hebrew version of the legend is that it was Lilith who persuaded Eve to eat the apple from the Tree Knowledge. Feminists point out that this creates dual stereotypes of women as evil and as gullible. Either way, women are defined as bad. (Renavikar 91)

Conversely, Van Gogh advocated for the empowerment of women, particularly prostitutes and peasant women. He subscribed to the notion that only those devoid of sin or fault should be the first to accuse or judge others for their transgressions, as exemplified in a biblical tale from the Gospel of John. In this story, Jesus demonstrated compassion and forgiveness towards a woman, reminding people of their own fallibility and need for absolution. This woman was Mary Magdalene. The message conveyed is one of humility, mercy, and a non-judgmental stance towards women. Van Gogh also employed the same biblical quote in his letter to Theo: ‘He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her’ (Letter 28), intending to emphasize that women should not be relegated to secondary status in society and that they possess inherent purity. As Van Gogh stated, ‘Purity of soul and impurity of body can go together’ (Letter 28). Here, he is also referencing Mary Magdalene. Van Gogh aimed to underscore the purity of women who society deemed impure. Clarified in the notes on Van Gogh's letters published by the Van Gogh Museum, ‘In this part of the letter Vincent pursues several questions that Theo touched upon in an earlier letter, one of which was how purity of spirit can go together with impurity of body, which is an allusion to Mary Magdalene’

(“The Letters” 28). Thus, Van Gogh sought to emphasize the importance of treating prostitutes with compassion, kindness, and love. The women depicted in his paintings embody all women who face oppression within society. By including images of trees in these paintings, Van Gogh aimed to depict the purity of women.

Van Gogh resided with Sien from 1881 to 1883. Consequently, although these particular paintings are not part of the Sien series, they were created during Van Gogh's time with Sien. It is conceivable that the girl portrayed in these paintings is Sien. In a broader context, through the trio of paintings—*Girl in the Woods*, *Girl in White in the Woods*, and *Two Women in the Woods*—Van Gogh endeavors to express his spiritual contemplations regarding women, often labeled as impure, aiming to highlight the “purity of soul” (Letter 28) within prostitutes.

In the painting *Girl in the Woods*, dated August 1882 (see Fig. 4), the girl is clad in a black dress, with a substantial oak tree positioned just behind her. The painting's utilization of black and the presence of trees underscore the painting's spirituality and divinity. In religious art, the color black is emblematic of mourning and penitence. Within Christianity, black is linked to death, sin, and darkness, often symbolizing the absence of God's light and the sensation of being lost or isolated. The painting's somber color palette evokes a sense of melancholy, frequently associated with religious themes of contrition and introspection. Hence, when the girl stands alone amid the trees in the painting, it suggests a feeling of sadness and solitude. This sentiment of desolation and isolation could be connected to how society tends to stigmatize women. However, trees embody notions of growth, renewal, and the cyclical nature of life. In Christian symbolism, trees are frequently associated with the Tree of Life mentioned in the Book

of Genesis. This Tree of Life signifies the link between God and humanity, as well as the promise of eternal life. Consequently, it could be inferred that despite the girl's averted gaze, indicative of her sins, she is sheltered by the trees, fostering a connection to divine energy. The trees might also represent the girl's spiritual journey as she navigates life's challenges. The dense forest could symbolize the girl's endeavors to overcome trials and temptations, striving to reach enlightenment. Likewise, Sien also grappled with life's hardships in her struggle for survival. In reference to Sien, Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "She is well, but weak and highly sensitive" (Letter 247).



Fig 4. Vincent van Gogh, *Girl in the Woods*, 1882, Private collection, Amsterdam.

Van Gogh mentioned Sien in his letters to Theo, expressing his desire to protect the pregnant prostitute and her child like a tree, offering them hope and restoring the soul

they had lost. He justified his actions to his parents by asserting that every man has a duty to aid women in need. According to notes on his letters published by the Van Gogh Museum, “Van Gogh could justify his relationship with Sien by means of Michelet’s argument that men who are unwilling to protect a woman should be ashamed of themselves” (“The Letters” 186). Thus, Van Gogh's intention in assisting Sien and situating her among trees might have been to extend salvation and erase the imprinted stigma on prostitutes.

The substantial oak tree behind the girl could symbolize the oak of righteousness mentioned in the Bible. As stated in the Bible, “To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified” (Isa. 61:3). This verse conveys a message of hope, directed at the people of Zion to inspire confidence and faith in God. Despite efforts by their adversaries to portray them as weak, God reminds them that their unwavering faith renders them strong and steadfast like oak trees. Thus, in the Bible, the oak tree signifies strength and endurance. Van Gogh aims to depict that even though society humiliates the girl, her resolute willpower and endurance enable her salvation. Her strength, akin to an oak tree, remains steadfast. Similar to an oak tree's strength residing in its roots, the girl's strength is likened to the roots of an oak tree. While hidden from view, these roots possess the fortitude to withstand various natural calamities. Van Gogh draws a parallel between a woman's strength and an oak tree's roots. Notably, he portrays only the lower parts (roots) of the trees in the painting, emphasizing the girl's righteousness akin to an oak tree. This can be connected to Sien's rejuvenation from her vulnerabilities; physically weak yet

internally robust, she battles life's obstacles. This sentiment is evident in Van Gogh's letter to his friend Anthon van Rappard about Sien, where he exclaims, "She renews, she reinvigorates, she gives life!" (Letter 184).

In another painting, *Girl in White in the Woods* (see fig. 5), dated August 1882, the girl dons a white dress symbolizing her purity. The white attire signifies innocence, depicting a pure soul amidst an untouched natural setting. Van Gogh seeks to portray the 'purity' of woman (Letter 28), possibly alluding to Sien. As elucidated by D.L. Higginbotham in *Color in Scripture: Its Significance in the Bible, Its Hidden Meanings in Nature in Christianity*, white epitomizes Christ's righteousness, cleansing sinners who turn to Him. In Second Corinthians (5:2), Jesus absolves individuals of sin, rendering them pure 'as white as snow' through His righteousness. He assumes their sins, leaving them pure:

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. (Isa.1:16 - 18)

The girl in the painting gazes directly at viewers, a distinct contrast from the other 1882 paintings featuring women in woods. Her white dress can be interpreted as a symbol of purity or spiritual enlightenment. The girl embodies hope and redemption in a tumultuous world. The dense, intricate woods in the painting's backdrop metaphorically represent life's trials, while the girl's presence in the foreground signifies enduring beauty

and goodness amid darkness. The girl symbolizes a divine or spiritual figure who brings light and healing to a fallen world. Her white dress symbolizes purity and grace, juxtaposed against the dark forest symbolizing humanity's fallen nature. In this manner, Van Gogh aims to portray Sien as an untainted woman, akin to the liberation of 'Mary Magdalene' from sin ("The Letters" 28).



Fig. 4. Vincent van Gogh, *Girl in White in the Woods*, 1882, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

Two Women in the Woods (see fig. 6), painted in the same month of August 1882, portrays two women in brown dresses in the woods. Here, Van Gogh might not only be referring to Sien but also to women in general, showing how women are connected to God and nature. In Christianity, brown is an earthly color symbolizing the earth and is commonly used in a monk's robe (*Color in Scripture*). As such, it represents humility

and signifies the connection between God and commonplace, ordinary people. Brown color is also associated with the concept of salvation (*Color in Scripture*). The two women, by wearing brown dresses, could be interpreted as their connection with God and their longing for salvation. Thus, it shows the connection women have with God, just as every other creature does.

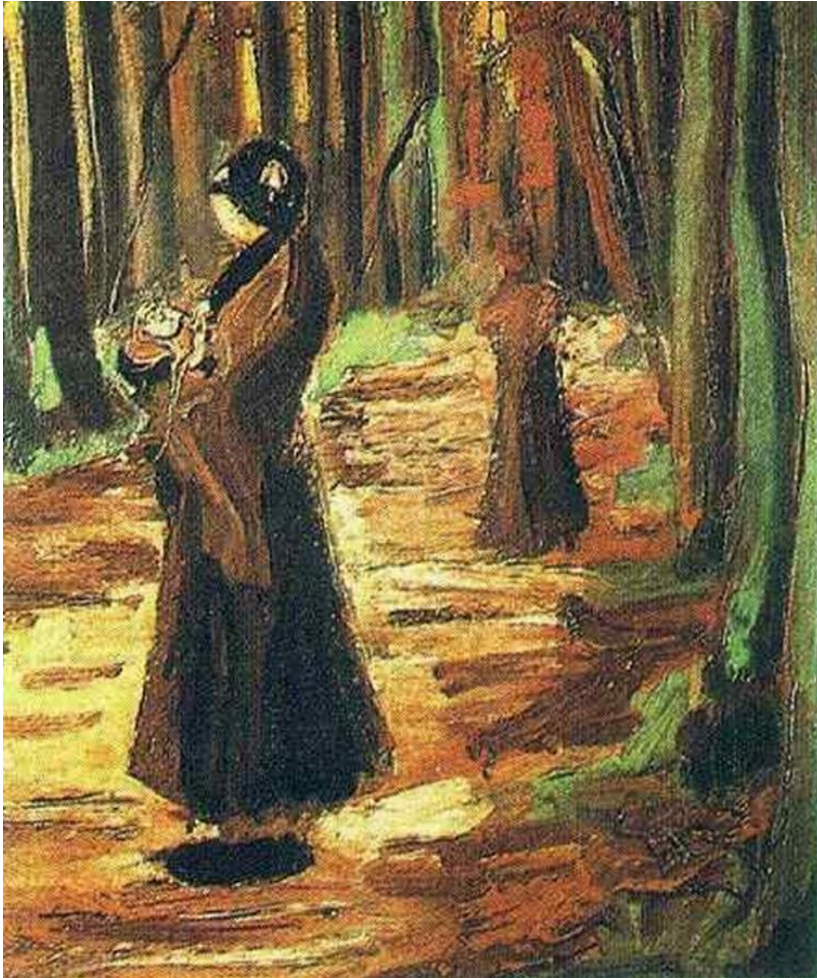


Fig. 5. Vincent van Gogh, *Two Women in the Woods*, 1882, Private Collection, Paris.

In all three of the aforementioned paintings, Van Gogh has not fully depicted the images of the trees, only portraying the roots and the middle portion while omitting the upper parts, including branches and leaves. The image of the ‘tree of life’ is mentioned in the Book of Genesis, conveying three distinct meanings related to the tree's main parts:

upper, middle, and lower. The crown or upper part symbolizes wisdom, the middle or trunk symbolizes mind and body, and the lower part or root symbolizes belief (*Reforesting Faith*). Examining these paintings, it is evident that Van Gogh intentionally omitted the upper parts to emphasize the mind, body, and beliefs of the women. This could be interpreted as how their minds and bodies are connected to the divine force of nature and their strong belief in God. Through these paintings, Van Gogh also reflects his own belief in God and the divine power of nature.

Van Gogh is truly a master of paintings; he knows how to express ideas and convey them to his audience. When analyzing his paintings, it is apparent that he incorporates religious imagery and ensures that these imageries are reflected in the titles of the paintings to emphasize their significance. In the painting *The Peasant Woman Seated Before an Open Door, Peeling Potatoes* (1885) (see fig. 6), he highlights the door by describing it as an 'open door'.

The open door behind the peasant woman is a common symbol in religious and spiritual imagery, representing a gateway to a higher realm or enlightenment. In this painting, the open door could symbolize the woman's openness to spiritual experiences or her desire to connect with the divine. By considering the image of the open door as a biblical imagery, Revelation 3:8 states, "I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name". The context and meaning of the verse suggest that Christ told the angel of the church in Philadelphia that he accepts and protects everyone who comes to him. This isn't limited to specific organizations but applies to all faithful believers following the path shown by Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the door: by me if any man

enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9). In both these verses, Christ refers to himself as an open door, and those who enter through it will always be protected. The door in this painting is open before the peasant woman, and it could be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the open door mentioned in the Book of Revelation. Therefore, the image in the painting could signify that Christ has opened his doors for her, allowing her to follow the path he has shown while being under his protection. Even though society might close doors in front of women, Jesus never does that.

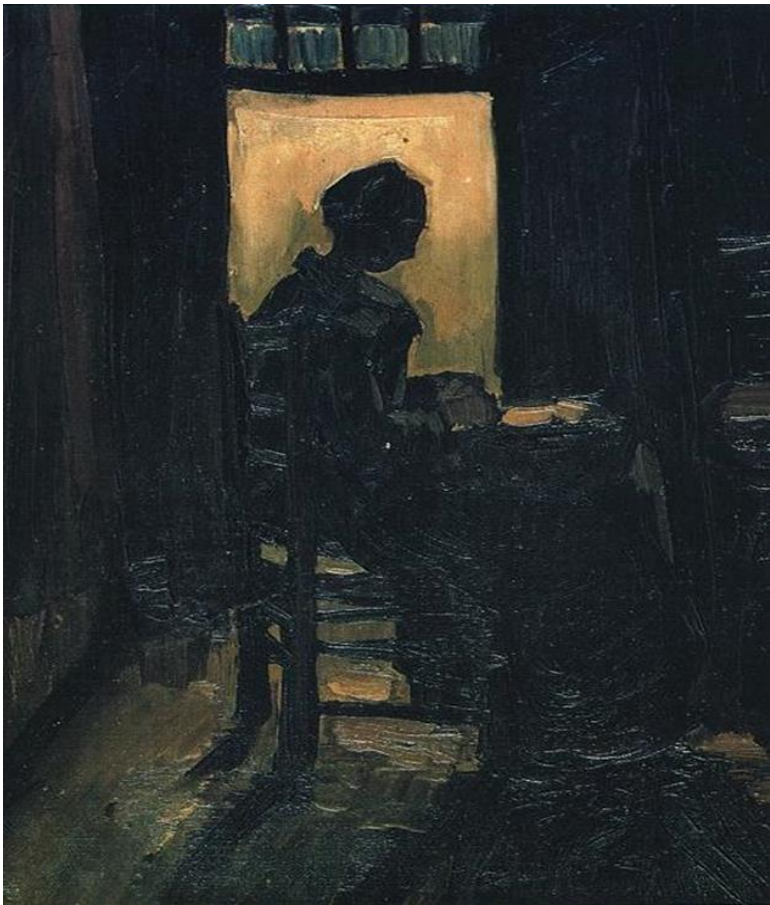


Fig. 6. Vincent van Gogh, *The Peasant Woman Seated Before an Open Door, Peeling Potatoes*, 1885, Private Collection.

The peasant woman in the painting is seated, her hands clasped together in her lap, resembling a prayerful pose. This stance suggests her devotion to faith and connection to a higher power. While seemingly ordinary, the act of peeling potatoes can also bear religious and spiritual significance. Peeling symbolizes purification, stripping the outer layer to reveal purity and essence. This can metaphorize the spiritual process of shedding distractions and worldly concerns to connect with true self or a higher power.

The painting's color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones, often linked with nature, simplicity, and spirituality. The blue sky in the backdrop could also symbolize the infinite or transcendental. Thus, Vincent van Gogh's painting *The Peasant Woman Seated Before an Open Door, Peeling Potatoes* exemplifies his use of religious and spiritual imagery in his art.

Women from lower classes with menial jobs are frequently subjected to discrimination and victimization. This dual oppression prevents society from regarding them as human; rather, they are treated as the lowest of creatures. When Van Gogh depicted a woman binding sheaves in the painting *Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves (after Millet)* (1889) (see fig. 7), he aimed to acknowledge women in lowly professions and instill a spark of hope in them.

A prominent aspect of the painting is the manipulation of light and color to evoke a sense of divine radiance. The sun, a golden orb in the upper right corner, bathes the field and the woman's face in warm, glowing light. This use of light and color implies transcendence and spiritual elevation, as if the woman is toiling in a sacred realm.

Moreover, harvesting wheat and binding sheaves can be symbolic of the biblical parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30), in which Jesus explains the separation of

the righteous from the unrighteous at the end of time. The woman's labor can be seen as a metaphor for sorting and gathering souls, where wheat signifies the faithful and tares represent the wicked.



Fig. 7. Vincent van Gogh, *Peasant Woman Binding Sheaves* (after Millet), 1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

The woman herself can also be interpreted as a spiritual figure. Her bowed head, reflecting concentration, suggests a sense of devotion and piety. Furthermore, her rustic dress and humble posture evoke the image of a peasant saint or holy martyr, enduring suffering and hardship in service to God.

The portrayal of this strong peasant woman can be seen as a parallel image of Ruth, a Moabite widow who is described in the book of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. At

a time when women were typically excluded from genealogies, Ruth's unwavering faith earned her a place in this lineage. It's noteworthy that only two books in the Bible are named after women: Esther and Ruth. Ruth, an ordinary yet powerful widow, found salvation and success through her immense faith. After her husband's death, her mother-in-law, Naomi, suggested that she return to her parents and remarry, but Ruth chose to journey with her mother-in-law, showcasing her selfless nature and hope for the future.

The verses about Ruth can be related to the image depicted in the painting, where the peasant woman binding sheaves draws parallels to Ruth's life. Ruth herself gleaned the sheaves in the fields of Boaz. As she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men to allow her to gather even among the sheaves, leaving purposeful handfuls for her without reproach. Ruth gleaned until evening, threshing what she had gathered, amounting to about an ephah of barley (Ruth 2: 15 - 17).

In her life's journey, Boaz became Ruth's redeemer. Comparing Ruth and the peasant woman in the painting, both emerged from impoverished families, toiling to support their kin. The peasant woman represents the diligent working class, grappling to overcome familial hardships. She, too, anticipates a brighter future and a redeemer to alleviate her pains and suffering, mirroring Boaz's role for Ruth.

Thus, this painting can be interpreted as a portrayal of the peasant woman as a strong figure. It also reflects Van Gogh's perspective on women. He envisioned a future where women would attain recognition and respect. Rather than portraying a male figure, Van Gogh intentionally chose a peasant female figure to showcase her industriousness.

Van Gogh's painting *The Shepherdess (after Millet)* (1889) is an interpretation of *The Shepherdess* by French artist Jean-Francois Millet. Millet was renowned for

depicting rural life, and in *The Shepherdess*, he portrayed a young woman tending to sheep in a pastoral setting. In Van Gogh's rendition, he infuses religious and spiritual symbolism. He presents the Shepherdess as one who awaits her cattle, a motif associated with Jesus as the 'good shepherd.' Jesus states, "I am the good shepherd, and know my *sheep*, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10: 14 – 15). By calling himself 'the good shepherd,' Jesus signifies his role in safeguarding and guiding his followers.

The Shepherdess in the painting appears fatigued yet remains watchful for her cattle's return to ensure their safety. Similarly, Jesus safeguards, guides, nurtures, and sacrifices himself for his people, embodying the essence of a good shepherd. In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10: 11).

However, Van Gogh never labels her a 'good shepherd' or assigns her the title 'the good shepherdess,' a designation reserved for Jesus. Instead, he simply refers to her as 'the shepherdess,' attributing to her the qualities of a caregiver and protector.

The young woman, with her unassuming attire and modest posture, takes on the semblance of a biblical figure, embodying the virtues of humility, innocence, and purity associated with the Virgin Mary.



Fig. 8. Vincent van Gogh, *The Shepherdess (after Millet)*, 1889, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel.

The landscape surrounding the shepherdess is also infused with spiritual significance. The vast expanse of fields and hills reminds us of the biblical stories portraying shepherds diligently tending to their flocks in open fields. An example is the story of the shepherds who received a visit from angels, announcing the birth of Jesus.

The vibrant colors that Van Gogh employs in the painting further enhance its spiritual and religious imagery. The vivid blue sky and the lush green fields suggest the beauty and abundance of God's creation. Additionally, the golden hues of the wheat and the warm tones of the shepherdess's skin evoke the radiance of divine grace and warmth.

Van Gogh's painting, *The Peasant Woman Digging in a Snow-Covered Field at Sunset* (1890) (see fig. 9), depicts a woman toiling in a winter field. One of the most striking elements of the painting is the bright orange and yellow sunset in the background. This could symbolize the divine, as the sun has long been linked with spiritual and religious symbolism across cultures. The sun's warm colors also provide a contrast to the cold, snowy landscape, infusing hope and warmth into an otherwise harsh environment.



Fig. 9. Vincent van Gogh, *The Peasant Woman Digging in a Snow Covered Field at Sunset*, 1890, Foundation E.G. Bührle, Zurich.

Historically, Jesus was known to pray on the mountains during sunset. In this painting, the artist captures a moment where the peasant woman is amidst the snowy landscape at sunset, making the element of time significant. Biblically, sunset signifies

the end of the day, and Van Gogh's portrayal of this moment could reflect the woman's yearning for divine blessings.

Another potential religious or spiritual symbol in the painting is the woman's posture and position. She is depicted as hunched over and digging into the earth, which could be seen as a metaphor for labor or toil, concepts that have been associated with spiritual or religious ideas like redemption or purification. Additionally, her position could be interpreted as a reference to the story of Adam and Eve, who were cursed to till the soil after being expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The woman's dress is also noteworthy, primarily blue and white, colors that have been used in religious art to symbolize the Virgin Mary. Though there is no explicit reference to Mary in the painting, the color choice could be seen as a subtle homage to her.

The peasant woman digging in the snow-covered field demonstrates her yearning for spiritual purification, as snow is a symbol of purity. “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Ps. 51: 7). As quoted in Pete Enns in his article “The Biblical Teaching on Snow, And Why It Matters”, “Snow falls at God’s command (Job 37: 6) from heaven (Isa. 55: 10), specifically from heavenly storehouses (Job 38: 22). Snow is associated with the forgiveness of sins (Ps. 51: 7; Is. 1: 18)”. Thus, when Van Gogh depicts a snow-covered field around a peasant woman in his painting, he aims to illustrate how snow purifies women and includes them in the group of blessed people.

The painting, *Young Girl Standing Against a Background of Wheat* (1890) (see fig.10), took form when Van Gogh was in Auvers-Sur-Oise, France. Van Gogh captured

the moment of a girl in a white dress standing against a wheat field, wearing a yellow cap.



Fig. 10. Vincent van Gogh, *Young Girl Standing Against a Background of Wheat*, 1890, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

When analyzing the painting in a religious context, it's important to note the colors employed and the image of wheat in the artwork. The image of wheat is a biblical symbol commonly used in Christianity. The wheat field in the painting's background likely references the biblical parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), in which Jesus explains that the kingdom of heaven is similar to a field of wheat that contains both good and evil. In the painting, the wheat field can be seen as a symbol of life's abundance and richness, as well as the potential for both growth and destruction. . As given in Matthew 13: 24 - 30,

. . . The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way . . . Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

The girl in the painting is wearing a simple white dress, which is often associated with purity, innocence, honesty, and cleanliness in Christian and spiritual traditions. The white color in Christianity also serves as the liturgical color of Christmas and Easter. So, when Van Gogh absorbed the image of the girl with a white dress, it showcases her as spiritually pure and good. The dress could also be interpreted as a symbol of the girl's connection to nature, as it blends in with the wheat field behind her.

The yellow background of the painting is reminiscent of the sun, which is often associated with spiritual enlightenment and the divine. The color yellow is also commonly linked to joy, happiness, and optimism, which could be interpreted as a reflection of the girl's spiritual state. The yellow color in the cap worn by the girl symbolically means the faith and glory of God. Therefore, Van Gogh placed the girl in the painting in the midst of Jesus's and God's symbolic wheat image.

In conclusion, this chapter focuses on how Van Gogh depicts women in his paintings from a religious and spiritual perspective. In his paintings, he gave his female characters faces that are not decorated with riches, but with life, survival, and reality. Even though these paintings reflect Van Gogh's spiritual thoughts on women, they also point to how Van Gogh embraced divinity and spirituality in his life. And portray Van

Gogh as a social activist who advocated for women using his religious and spiritual beliefs. Therefore, the religious and spiritual elements used in the painting suggest that Van Gogh was exploring themes of faith, purity, and spiritual enlightenment in his work. Thus, showing himself as a person who had beliefs in spirituality and divinity.

Chapter V

Conclusion

The thesis, titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh," establishes Van Gogh as a fervent follower of divine and spiritual aspects throughout his life. By exploring his correspondences and artworks that incorporate religious symbolism, this thesis showcases Van Gogh's unwavering dedication to his religious and spiritual convictions. His letters and paintings provide compelling evidence of his profound bond with the divine.

In a letter dated August 26th, 1876, addressed to Theo, Van Gogh wrote,

I'm still a long way from being what I'd like to be, but with God's help I'll succeed. What do I want — — — to be bound to Christ with unbreakable bonds and to feel those bonds. To be sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. To live in and for Christ, to be one of the poor in His kingdom, leavened with the leaven, inspired by His Spirit, constrained by His Love, resting in the Father with that rest of which I spoke in my last letter. To become one who cannot rest in anything but in Him, who desires nothing on earth beside Him, and who lives in the Love of God and of Christ, in whom we are intimately bound with one another. (Letter 89)

This quote serves to demonstrate his unwavering faith in God and Christ.

This thesis also illustrates how Van Gogh employed his letters and paintings as primary tools to convey his perspectives and thoughts on religion and spirituality to the world. As a former evangelist, he was dedicated to assisting impoverished individuals in need. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, "You see, it always strikes me and it is remarkable, when

we see the image of unutterable and indescribable forsakenness – of loneliness – of poverty and misery, the end of things or their extremity – the thought of God comes to mind” (Letter 148). Furthermore, he utilized paintings as his medium of expression to communicate his reflections. As such, this thesis also focuses on how he utilized art and religion as mediums to highlight social inequalities in the world, particularly in terms of gender. Hence, this thesis delves into the exploration and analysis of the religious imageries employed by Van Gogh to articulate his divine and spiritual reflections on oppressed women through art.

Despite various studies claiming that Van Gogh was opposed to the church and religion, this thesis establishes that Van Gogh was an individual who found a place for himself within religion and invoked spirituality. Consequently, this thesis explores the manners in which Vincent van Gogh incorporated religious imagery into his artwork and correspondence. Through thorough analysis, this thesis showcases that Van Gogh was profoundly religious and embraced spirituality throughout his life. By examining the motifs, symbols, and themes present in his paintings and letters, this thesis sheds light on the artist's religious beliefs and examines how these convictions influenced his creative vision.

The thesis, titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh", also portrays Van Gogh as a man of letters and a skilled writer. Van Gogh held the belief that great artists and writers express their love for God through their masterpieces. In a letter to Theo, he wrote, “Try to understand the last word of what the great artists, the serious masters, say in their masterpieces; there will be God in it. Someone has written or said it in a book, someone

in a painting” (Letter 155). The notion that exceptional artists can guide people to God is a recurring theme in various religious and philosophical traditions. Throughout history, artists have been regarded as insightful and perceptive individuals, capable of conveying profound truths about human experiences and their connection to the divine. While the methods artists use to convey their messages may differ, whether through writing, painting, sculpture, or other forms of artistic expression, the objective remains constant: to inspire individuals to seek deeper meaning and establish a connection with the divine.

Thus, Van Gogh's words suggest that diverse artists may employ various mediums to convey their messages, but ultimately, the message stays consistent. Whether it's through a book or a painting, the objective is to help people connect with God and comprehend the significance of their existence. Overall, Van Gogh strongly believed in the idea that great artists can lead people to God, underscoring the enduring allure of art as a vehicle for expressing the ineffable and transcendent aspects of the human experience.

Therefore, whether as an artist or a writer, they express their thoughts on divine power through their work, as Van Gogh asserted and believed. This assertion is substantiated by the thesis "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh". Hence, through his letters and paintings, Van Gogh, as both an artist and a writer, conveyed his spiritual and divine thoughts to the world.

The thesis also sheds light on how Van Gogh employed his artwork to attain peace and salvation in life. Consequently, the thesis, aided by his letters, presents Van

Gogh as a profound philosopher and a societal revolutionary, in addition to being a skilled writer who conveys his thoughts and messages through words.

In his letter 673 addressed to Theo, Van Gogh acknowledged that he couldn't achieve his best in life and art without something greater than himself – the power to create. For him, the act of creation was a profoundly spiritual encounter that enabled him to connect with a force larger than himself. This 'something' could be construed in various ways, whether as the essence of life, nature, or the universe. Irrespective of its nature, it served as a wellspring of inspiration and a motivating factor in his life. Furthermore, Van Gogh grappled with significant personal tribulations throughout his lifetime, as evident in his art. He confronted challenges stemming from mental health issues, financial hardships, and personal relationships. Despite these adversities, he persisted in creating and found solace in the act of painting. He was of the belief that the power to create offered a pathway to transcend his suffering and connect with something greater than himself.

The introduction chapter provides an overview of the thesis along with an explanation of its structure. With a clearly stated thesis statement and research objectives, this chapter introduces the primary focus, aims, and objectives of the thesis. Additionally, it provides insight into the life of Vincent van Gogh, his letters, and paintings. To substantiate the argument raised in the thesis, this chapter thoroughly explains the methods employed. As such, the methodology used in each subsequent chapter is detailed, accompanied by a summary of the chapter's goals. The rationale behind the selection of specific paintings and letters is discussed within this chapter. It also offers a glimpse into the Post-Impressionist theory utilized in the thesis. However, given the

multitude of significant studies and research on Van Gogh, the relevance of this thesis is established through a comprehensive literature review. This review delves into important books and research studies related to Van Gogh's biography, critical analyses of his life, artwork, and letters, Post-Impressionist theory, research linking Van Gogh and Japan to demonstrate the influence of Buddhism on him, and studies highlighting his religious quest and spirituality. The literature review also aids in identifying research gaps and delineating the scope of this interdisciplinary exploration in literature and the arts.

Each chapter forges a path towards the thesis's research objectives. The second chapter, titled "A Man of Words: Exploring Vincent van Gogh's Literary Persona and His Epistolary Expressions of Religious and Spiritual Beliefs," achieves one of the thesis's research objectives by analyzing all available letters of Van Gogh. This chapter portrays Van Gogh as an adept writer with profound spiritual views. It centers on Van Gogh's letters and how they portray him as an exceptional writer. Through these letters, Van Gogh conveys his spiritual thoughts and perspectives, showcasing his talent not only as an artist but also as a skilled writer. The chapter presents Van Gogh as a superb writer who molds his thoughts and emotions into impactful words capable of influencing, disseminating ideas, and effecting change in society. Thus, his letters not only unveil his personal life but also articulate his viewpoints across various situations and topics, particularly concerning religion and spirituality. His letters reflect his spirituality and divinity, underscoring their significance in his life. Overall, the chapter aims to underscore the importance of Van Gogh's letters in portraying him as a man of letters and expressing his profound spiritual perspectives. This chapter also aids in comprehending and corroborating significant events in Van Gogh's life through his own words, thereby

tracing and analyzing the pivotal phases crucial for this thesis's elaboration.

Consequently, this chapter not only shapes him as a philosopher-like writer but also aids in gathering key evidence from his letters, confirming the accuracy of pivotal, well-known events in his life.

The third chapter, titled “Religious Imageries in Vincent Van Gogh’s Post-Impressionist Paintings”, delves into the Christian and Buddhist religious imagery present in Van Gogh's paintings. This chapter portrays Van Gogh as a Post-Impressionist artist who communicates his spiritual and divine musings through his artworks. The chapter adopts a theoretical approach by analyzing select paintings of Van Gogh through the lens of Post-Impressionist theory, accentuating the distinctive artistic qualities associated with it. The chapter establishes how Van Gogh utilized specific themes to convey his thoughts and emotions using colors and religious imagery in his paintings, thereby shedding light on his spiritual and religious inclinations. This analysis underscores how Post-Impressionism provided Van Gogh a means to convey his spiritual beliefs and perspectives to a wider audience. It interprets chosen paintings that narrate significant incidents integral to Van Gogh’s life. By scrutinizing these works through the prism of Post-Impressionist theory, it becomes evident that the paintings not only showcase unique artistic elements but also unveil the symbolism and spiritual meanings embedded in the artwork.

Hence, the chapter examines the relevance of religious imagery in Vincent van Gogh's artworks, elucidating how they functioned as conduits for his deepest spiritual reflections. It highlights Van Gogh's remarkable ability to infuse his artworks with metaphorical meanings surpassing mere aesthetic appeal. The chapter explores how Post-

Impressionism's emphasis on individual expression and departure from established aesthetic norms offered Van Gogh an ideal platform to explore religious imagery as a potent tool for spiritual inquiry. As such, the chosen paintings from 1885 to 1890 are dissected within the context of Christian and Buddhist religious imagery.

The fourth chapter, titled “The Social Activist Embracing Spirituality: Vincent van Gogh’s Artistic Portrayals of Women’s Divine and Spiritual Essence”, portrays Van Gogh as a social activist. The chapter analyzes a collection of paintings to illustrate how Van Gogh intertwined his religious and spiritual convictions into his art, particularly through religious imagery, to articulate his thoughts and advocate for marginalized groups in society. This chapter sheds light on how Vincent van Gogh harnessed his artistic talents to champion the cause of disenfranchised individuals, especially peasant women and prostitutes. The analysis zooms in on paintings featuring Christian religious imagery and women, subjecting them to detailed scrutiny. Consequently, this chapter fulfills the research objective of painting Van Gogh as a revolutionary figure with spiritual inclinations, a man who championed the cause of oppressed women subjected to dual societal marginalization. The chapter unveils how, through his artistic creations, Van Gogh endeavors to carve out a space for women within both societal and religious contexts. As a result, this chapter casts Van Gogh as an individual who employed art as a platform to communicate his divine and spiritual musings regarding women through his paintings.

From his earliest extant letter, written on 29 September 1872, to his final letter on 23 July 1890, Van Gogh narrated his own story – detailing major events in his life, his thoughts, ideas, view of the world, contributions to society, art, and beliefs. Thus, this

thesis draws from Van Gogh's existing letters, weaving them together to emphasize the spiritual facet of his life.

The paintings utilized in this research are not photographs taken in person from museums, but rather original images provided by the museums on their official websites. However, with guidance from art historians, books, critical studies, research papers on Van Gogh, and Van Gogh's own letters, this thesis diligently strives to discern the exact imagery and colors employed by Van Gogh in his paintings. Therefore, the absence of camera-captured depictions of the paintings has not compromised the thesis's quality, as it has adopted optimal methodologies for analyzing the artworks.

The research study titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh" endeavors to address a gap in existing studies on Van Gogh. This thesis portrays him with hues of hope and spirituality. While biographical and critical studies reviewing his life, art and career offer a platform to unveil stories from his life and career, they fall short of depicting him solely as a religious man with a depressive demeanor. These studies neglect to explore his life as a social activist or as a man who inspired others through his art.

Numerous studies explore the influence of religion on Van Gogh, contending that he turned against God after his expulsion from the Church. However, this thesis bridges the research gap by presenting critical perspectives supported by tangible evidence, showcasing how Van Gogh embraced spirituality and God while distancing himself from the stifling grip of the church.

There are limited studies that link Van Gogh to Buddhism or interpret his works through a Buddhist lens. Yet, as the fundamental link between Van Gogh and Buddhism

is Japanese art, the literature review scrutinizes books about Van Gogh and Japan. This research study on Van Gogh and Buddhism addresses this gap by providing an extensive analysis, examining how Buddhism influenced and shaped Van Gogh's life and creative output. This chapter delves into paintings that are examined through the lens of Christian imagery and further explored through Buddhist symbolism.

This thesis revolves around illuminating Vincent van Gogh's spiritual and divine beliefs, presenting a more positive viewpoint on his life. It contends that Van Gogh embraced spirituality and divinity in both his art and personal life – an aspect often overshadowed by his struggles with mental illness and personal adversities. His sanguine approach to life becomes evident in his letters to his brother Theo. In letter 155, Van Gogh wrote to Theo:

. . . what has changed is that my life was less difficult then and my future less dark, but as far as my inner self, as far as my way of seeing and thinking are concerned, they haven't changed. But if in fact there were a change, it's that now I think and I believe and I love more seriously what then, too, I already thought, I believed and I loved.

Van Gogh suggested that belief in God is not simply a matter of intellectual acceptance or adherence to religious doctrines. Instead, he emphasized the importance of a personal experience or feeling of the divine presence. For him, believing in God means having a profound sense that God exists and is actively present in the world. He also rejected the notion of God being lifeless or relegated to an abstract concept. Through his letters and paintings, Van Gogh expressed the idea that this belief in a living God creates a powerful inner motivation or urging within individuals. Van Gogh wrote to Theo, “. . .

to me, to believe in God is to feel that there is a God, not dead or stuffed but alive, urging us toward aimer encore with irresistible force - that is my opinion” (Letter 189).

Van Gogh suggested that the belief in God acts as a driving force, compelling us to embrace love and express it more fully in our lives. In summary, this thesis proves that Van Gogh emphasized the opinion that believing in God is not a mere intellectual exercise but a deeply felt experience of a living, dynamic divine presence.

Therefore, by placing the thesis within the parameters of the study's goals, this thesis analyzes all of Van Gogh's letters and paintings with religious imagery, highlighting his personal and artistic expressions of faith. Van Gogh was known for his intense and passionate approach to painting, and his art often reflected his spiritual and religious beliefs. For example, his iconic painting *The Starry Night* is often interpreted as a representation of the divine and the cosmos, and his series of paintings featuring sunflowers have been interpreted as symbols of spiritual devotion.

In addition to his artwork, Van Gogh also wrote extensively about his personal beliefs and experiences with spirituality and religion. His letters, which he wrote to family and friends throughout his life, offer valuable insights into his thoughts on faith and his relationship with God. This study also sheds light on the social outcast system and established standards of social exclusion that exist in society. Therefore, through a careful analysis of both Van Gogh's artwork and his personal writings, the thesis presents a more complete picture of the artist as a deeply spiritual and religious person, highlighting the role that faith played in his life and works.

Chapter VI

Recommendations

The primary objective of the thesis, titled "Rays of Divinity and Blaze of Spirituality: Religious Imageries in the Letters and Paintings of Vincent Willem van Gogh," is to explore the profound connection between Van Gogh's life and his artistic endeavours. By analysing the religious imageries found in his letters and paintings, this research aims to portray Van Gogh not only as an accomplished artist but also as a profound writer. Through his masterful manipulation of words and colours, Van Gogh delved into the depths of spirituality, using his artistic expressions to convey his innermost reflections on faith and divinity. This study seeks to shed light on the luminous rays of spirituality that radiate through Van Gogh's works revealing his spiritual and religious reflections.

The foundation of this research lies in the evidence extracted from events detailed in his own letters, which are taken as the cornerstone of this study. Consequently, the research delves exclusively into the events outlined within Van Gogh's existing 902 letters. Supported by historical evidence from art history and an analysis of his artistic style, Van Gogh is acknowledged as a Post-Impressionist artist within the art world. Thus, the framework of this thesis is structured around the evidence garnered from his letters and art history.

The thesis also exclusively evaluates Van Gogh's paintings through the lens of Post-Impressionism. However, the scope for scrutinizing his artworks isn't confined to a single theory. Given his unique artistic style, there is ample room for interpreting his paintings through various theoretical perspectives. Hence, the potential for conducting research that situates him and his paintings within a different artistic era or movement

remains viable, provided there is a clearly defined basis for such an approach. Notably, Van Gogh is often considered a pioneering figure in Expressionism, thus opening the door to interpreting his works within that framework. Therefore, the option of analyzing his paintings within the context of other art movements or theories is equally valid. The choice of Post-Impressionism for this thesis was informed by the primary objective of exploring how this artistic movement facilitated Van Gogh's expression of spiritual insights and religious viewpoints. Thus, the selection of a theoretical framework for structuring a research study hinges on the study's central focus.

Throughout the thesis, letters occupy a central position as the primary focus of this research endeavor. The events documented in his letters, spanning from his earliest to his final correspondence, constitute the primary basis for this study. Consequently, the exploration and investigation of aspects of his life not explicitly covered in his letters are also conceivable.

The thesis also delves into the influence of Japanese art on Van Gogh, presenting a compelling illustration of Eastern art shaping Western artistic sensibilities. This perspective challenges the prevailing notion that Western culture predominantly influences the East. It shows how Japanese artistic elements profoundly impacted Van Gogh's creative style and visionary outlook. This unique case serves as a potential catalyst for broader exploration into the expansive influence of the East on the West. An in-depth examination of diverse aspects such as art, literature, religion, and more could unveil the multifaceted ways in which the East has made an indelible mark on the Western world. This can be further elaborated upon, thus expanding the horizons of future studies in this research domain.

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