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How Emily Dickinson and Vincent van Gogh Understood and Expressed Their Personal Battles with Depression

Depression, historically referred to as melancholy, is an incredibly real and often debilitating medical condition that humanity has been afflicted with since long before there was a definition in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders for mood disorders. Oftentimes, depression is considered a modern ailment, but it is only the word used for the disease that is a relatively new phenomenon. The umbrella term “melancholia” was used to describe depression and “all forms of quiet insanity” as far back as the time of the Greek physician Hippocrates. The term depression first came into use to describe heavy sadness in the nineteenth century and was included in diagnosis plans in the 1930’s (Paykel). Today, depression is a relatively common struggle, though one that still carries a stigma. Some 17.3 million American adults reported experiencing at least one major depressive episode in 2017, and 63.8% of those experienced severe impairment during the episode (NIMH). For a long time, depression, or melancholy, was written off as laziness, simple stress, suffering under the wrath of God or (typically in the case of women) hysteria. Depression is characterized by sadness, loss of interest, slowed mobility, “morbid preoccupation with worthlessness,” and suicidal ideation (Paykel). Physicians have come up with a variety of physiological explanations of depression

throughout time, originating with black bile before moving into types of organic causation and genetics (Paykel).

However, there was never a good understanding of or explanation for people suffering major depressive episodes. Science simply could not explain what caused melancholy. Women have always and continue to experience rates of depression at a significantly higher level than men according to a study by the National Institute of Mental Health, which reported that 8.7% of American adult women were diagnosed compared to 5.3% of American adult men. Historically, women were labeled hysterical if they suffered from depression or mania, like the focal character of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." This powerful short story exemplifies how depression was approached and grossly misunderstood at the turn of the 20th century, especially when it applied to women.

Artists, musicians, and authors have frequently turned to their chosen medium to find an outlet for expressing their melancholy. These creatives use their art to form a sort of language to allow them to demonstrate and discuss their ails. Charles Dickens, Edvard Munch, Ludwig van Beethoven, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy are just a few of the famed creatives who are known to have wrestled with major depression, clinical anxiety, or bipolar disorder. While there is no scientific support for a perceived correlation between mental illness and creativity, people are quick to identify painters, composers, and authors as mad geniuses or tortured artists.

The American poet Emily Dickinson and the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh are also famous for their struggles with mental health. There is a significance to the metaphors that both Dickinson and van Gogh used to understand their mental states, metaphors which were influenced by their personal contexts and their audience or lack of one. A modern reader who is

muddling through his or her own mental instability can gain a sense of comfort or solidarity from reading Vincent's letters or Dickinson's poems. There is value in studying literature written as a coping method, as it contributes to cultivating dialogue centered around suffering. Art therapy is a popular method for dealing with mental distress because creative work like drawing, writing, painting, sculpting, or composing provides a great outlet for stress, anxiety, and trauma.

While Dickinson and van Gogh both wrestled with depression, they were battling the disorder under very different sets of circumstances. The lives of the two overlapped for a few years (Dickinson was in her early twenties when van Gogh was born and died just four years before he did), but they are entirely distinct from one another in gender, nationality, cultural expectation, and audience. While the diseases that weighed them down were similar, the artists dealt with them in disparate ways and understood them using metaphors that differed greatly from each other. The media they expressed themselves through were reflective not only of how they chose to cope but also of how the context they existed within influenced their ability to understand and talk about their mental illnesses. Dickinson's private poems drafted primarily for her eyes only allowed for a very different approach than van Gogh's paintings, which were made to be seen and appreciated by others; the same is true of the letters that were written to his brother, Theo.

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, at the end of 1830. Dickinson grew up in Amherst where she received an "exceptional" education, considering her gender. Female education was not a priority at the time, but her father saw to it that she was enrolled in excellent schools. She attended Amherst Academy before enrolling in Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Her education in Latin and the classics contributed to the formation of her poetry style and could have influenced her understanding of language and word choice. Studies of

English grammar and logic are manifested in her poems' structure, while studies in "botany, natural history, and astronomy" provide the core of many of her metaphors. She spent fifteen years of her childhood living just up the street from a cemetery. There is speculation that this proximity to burials and grief contributed to her sometimes morbid preoccupation with death ("Biography"). The early deaths of some of her school friends may have also sparked her questions about dying and mortality, which was only encouraged by a lifetime of exposure to the deaths of those close to her.

Dickinson was aware of a separation between herself and her peers from a young age, asking her brother in a letter, "What makes a few of us so different from others?" ("Biography") As a child, Emily was relatively social, and she wrote about many friends. However, in her late twenties, she began retreating from any and all social situations, as she grew increasingly reclusive (Wolosky 2). She was highly selective in choosing what people she would maintain relationships with and was extremely close with a few select friends; after all, "The Soul selects her own Society" (poem 303). Her tactics for avoiding basic interactions, such as speaking to visitors from behind a curtain or closed door, or choosing to ignore guests altogether, are indicative of a severe anxiety disorder. Dickinson's retreat into herself and away from the world was a defense tactic (Wolosky 5).

The reclusive behavior exhibited by Dickinson, as well a massive uptick in her writing around the age of twenty-eight, coincided with the outbreak of the Civil War (Wolosky 2). This is highly interesting considering the lack of explicit reference to the war in her poetry. However, she was extremely disheartened by hatred and bloodshed and could not reconcile herself to a world with so much brokenness. This spurt of creativity, commonly referred to by Dickinson scholars as the "writing years" between 1855 and 1865, was the most productive time in Emily's

poetic life, which “resulted in her composing, revising, and saving hundreds of poems” (“Biography”). Dickinson poured herself entirely into the art of poetry.

Emily Dickinson did not write poetry for other people. Her poems were, rather famously, meant to be private, and she was relatively averse to the idea of having them published with her name on them. Like most anxiety sufferers, she internalized her pains and the only external outlet was her personal compilations of poems. By the time she was thirty-five, she had written “more than 1,100 concise, powerful lyrics” with around 800 of the works being compiled in her little homemade books, fascicles (“Biography”). A small handful of her poems were shown to her sister-in-law Susan and friend Thomas Wentworth Higgins. A few of her pieces were published in newspapers (supposedly without her prior consent) anonymously (“Biography”).

On the whole, therefore, Dickinson did not write for other people. It is believed that a failed romance may have fueled the writing. She also references some kind of “terror” (there is speculation that this terror is the fear of blindness as a result of her iritis) in her letters that may have offered a source for the emotional labor she undertook (“Biography”). For it was a labor. Dickinson took a deep dive into many difficult and personal questions and philosophical musings. She wrote on death and love, pain and beauty, nature and religion. All of these investigations were not for others, though: Dickinson wrote to examine these things for herself.

Since the publication and immense success of Dickinson’s work, there has been “considerable speculation” on her mental state. One study, using her letters rather than her poems as sources, has concluded that Dickinson must have suffered from bipolar disorder. She experienced panic attacks followed by intense agoraphobia (a kind of anxiety disorder involving an intense fear of social situations) and depressive states, what she herself described as “fixed melancholy” and what we today label seasonal depression (or seasonal affective disorder)

(McDermott). The evidences of all of these symptoms combined with the longstanding belief in the correlation of creativity and mental instability point towards Dickinson suffering from a mood disorder, whether that be major depression, an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, seasonal affective disorder, or all of the above (Ramey and Weisburg 173).

It feels like an obvious conclusion that Dickinson used her writing to attempt to give a real voice to her mental illnesses. In the late 1800's psychiatrists were only just beginning to understand what they called "melancholia" (Paykel). Therefore, there was not much of a language through which Dickinson could come to terms with her disorders. Dickinson did not have the luxury of a large vocabulary containing words like "major depression," "mood disorder," or "anxiety disorder" to give names to what she was feeling. There was no commonality of language available to describe or diagnose mental health, only stigma, and so she had to create her own metaphors and terms to describe the commotion inside of her. It was through her poems that she was able to process and put words to the very abstract concept of depression.

There are evidences of Dickinson experiencing both manic and depressive (high and low) states in stages, with two definable stages corresponding with the peak years of her writing career, from 1855 to 1865 (McDermott). Her frequent references to her love of the summer months coupled with her use of winter as a negative metaphor back the hypothesis that seasonal-affective disorder impacted her significantly. Additionally, her periods of grief seem to have been "prolonged" in the harsh months of New England winters (McDermott). The creative surges that she experienced following these depressive episodes qualify as a sort of mania, furthering the claim. It was not uncommon for her poems to bemoan the weight of winter: "It sifts from Leaden Sieves," (poem 311) and "The Snow that never drifts –" (poem 1133), pointing

to a diagnosis of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). Seasonal affective disorder is a specific form of depression that rises and falls with the change of the seasons, typically starting in the late fall and early winter and going away during the spring and summer (NIMH). The upward spikes in Dickinson's productivity during the warmer seasons seems to confirm that she wrestled with SAD. A study by McDermott found that "her productivity in 1858 and 1859 formed a distinct seasonal pattern, with summer accounting for three times the productivity of fall and winter combined."

"There's a certain Slant of light," (poem 258) is one of the most well-known of Dickinson's poems about depression. In just sixteen lines she puts to use almost all of her controlling metaphors for mental disorder – death, winter, light and darkness – as well as the themes of religious oppression and the universality of suffering. Most obviously, this poem details Dickinson's struggle with seasonal affective disorder. In poem 258 she challenges winter head on in the second line. She finds the light of "Winter Afternoons" oppressive and hefty. The idea of depression being heavy, or weight bearing, is common in her poems. This poem compares the winter light to the heaviness of hymns, which she calls "Cathedral Tunes" (l. 4). In this poem she talks about depression as a "Heavenly Hurt" that leaves deep and invisible scars (ll. 5-6), referencing the interior quality of her mental illness. Mental illness is equated to something sent from on high, be it a gift or a curse. She also identifies the universality of depression in this poem. She refers to despair as "An imperial affliction." Her word choice here, as well as the next line referencing the airborne quality of the pain (l. 12), implies that depression is a disease, a blight, a plague. Or perhaps this hearkens back to the heavenly, ethereal, quality of the light, granting it a power above the average entity. The concluding stanza of poem 258 focuses on the metaphor Dickinson used most frequently to describe depression: Death.

The comparisons of depression to physical, mental, and spiritual death are to be found in many of Dickinson's writings on the subject. It is believed by scholars that Dickinson suffered from more than one mood disorder – her diagnosis was not simply “depressed.” Seasonal affective disorder is one recognizable disorder. The fluctuating periods of productivity displayed, followed by periods of relative poetic silence, are also indicative of bipolar disorder. “Bipolar illness is a spectrum of disorders,” and not one that is easily understood, as it can present in a variety of ways (Ramey and Weisberg 173). Dickinson probably exhibited Bipolar II – a combination of major depression and hypomania (the feeling of being on top of the world often experienced by bipolar sufferers during manic phases, typically accompanied by hyperactivity). Studies have shown that she produced more than ten times the number of poems in her manic episodes than in years when she was depressed or between cycles (Ramey and Weisberg 176).

Dickinson seemed to possess an awareness of the cyclical nature of her illness, and how the shifts from depression to mania or from winter to spring affected her. She suffered so much loss in her life that she almost seemed to view her depression as a companion. In the poem “I dreaded that first Robin, so” (poem 348), Dickinson confesses a fear of the comfort of spring. She is scared of feeling so secure in spring and of being lifted out of her despair into a false sense of peace only to have winter and suffering come knock her down again. Pain and suffering were what was real, to her, and there was little comfort in happiness that could only stall until the next tragedy inevitably struck. She writes

I dared not meet the Daffodils –
 For fear their Yellow Gown
 Would pierce me with a fashion

So foreign to my own – (ll. 9-12)

The bright yellow of these freshly bloomed petals reminds her of a dress, the color of which contrasts starkly with her comfortable black clothes of mourning. The joy and ease of springtime only emphasizes her own pain during the winter.

Another poem that connects depression with death is “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (poem 280). In this poem, she chronicles the descent into insanity, marking the moment of shift from mania or stability to a depressive state. As her suffering grows heavier, she quite literally feels as if part of her is dying. She writes with the voice of a narrator who is not only observing but *feeling* her own funeral. She writes of the repetitive thoughts and numbness commonly listed as symptoms of major depression. There are metronomic sounds – beating drums (l. 6-7) and tolling bells (l. 13) – that speak to the monotony of existence and the continual passage of time. In the final few lines, which are not always included when this poem is anthologized, the speaker experiences a complete loss of her grasp on reality. The verse says she “dropped down, and down – / And hit a World, at every plunge,” suggesting that the onset of madness is quick and total (ll. 18-19). The worlds she hit may have helped to soften her fall, or they may have left her with greater bruising. This sudden onset of suffering is consistent with the medical understanding of bipolar disorder.

“It was not Death for I stood up” (poem 510) is a full twenty-four lines of various analogies and metaphors for depression. For example, the speaker goes through the list of her symptoms and debunks them as the cause of her pain. She begins with one of her favorite comparisons – that of death and dying – but contends that what she is feeling, though similar to how she assumes dying must feel, cannot be death because she can stand.

It was not Death, for I stood up

And all the Dead, lie down –

It was not Night, for all the Bells

Put out their Tongues, for Noon. (ll.1-4)

She then says that her experience cannot simply be the night, for the bells toll noon. The bells she references could be a metaphorical bell, interrupting the night, or it could literally mean that she knows it is not night because there is sunshine and church bells. She next describes feeling both “frost” and “fire.”

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh

I felt Siroccos – crawl –

Nor Fire – for just my marble feet

Could keep a Chancel, cool – (ll. 5-8)

This stanza places a strong focus on the physiological symptoms of depression, which include lethargy, insomnia or hypersomnia, and weight fluctuations (Paykel). She makes it clear that, despite logically knowing that it is not death, night, frost, or fire, “it Tasted, like them all” (l. 9). Her use of the word “Tasted” calls attention to the closeness of these sensations, describing it with the most intimate, incorporated sense of taste. She ends by comparing her state to that of a corpse, settling once again on death as the best metaphor for her struggle, saying she feels like a body laid out for burial (ll. 11-12).

The second half of the poem describes the utter loss of hope she feels. She says she is searching for the key to understanding her pain, but she feels suffocated. For her, time is at a standstill (l. 17) (another manifestation of the common depressive system of motor retardation, physical immobility may make time feel frozen in place) and she can see no beginning or ending to her anguish. She says that “space stares -” (l. 18) comparing the mentality of one bearing the

weight of depression to an endless void. Dickinson may point once again to the influence of SAD by complaining of the “Grisly frosts” (l. 19) brought about by autumn mornings. The use of the word “grisly” demonstrates how deep the cold is; she can feel it in her bones. Despite the poet’s natural desire for order, her world has descended into a chaos she cannot control. She brings in a new metaphor, likening herself to a shipwreck, with nothing to hold onto and no respite in sight.

But most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool –
 Without a Chance, or spar –
 Or even a Report of Land –
 To justify – Despair. (ll. 21-24)

She seeks some kind of tangible cause for the constant pain she endures, but because there is not a real understanding of depression, she cannot find the reason for her despair.

Dickinson, despite her reclusion, was still keenly aware that she was not the only person who suffered as she did. She observed the universality of mental illness and attempted to apply her own understanding of suffering to others. In “I measure every Grief I meet” (poem 561), Dickinson explores the various types of pain and mental illness she has borne witness to. She says that she studies others from a highly analytical perspective (l. 2) and tries to determine how heavy their depression is, returning to the concept of weightiness explored in poem 258. She seems to believe that, perhaps because of her own struggles, she can sense suffering in others.

She questions, for example, if others have wrestled with mental disorder as long as she has (ll. 5-8), if they too find living difficult (ll. 9-10), if they too are suicidal (ll. 11-12), if their smiles are also fake (ll. 14-15). Her description of her grief being “so old a pain” (l. 8) supports a diagnosis of major depression, as most diagnostic tools specify depressive moods lasting for a

sustained amount of time (NIMH). She speaks rather poignantly of those who fake their smiles as she does, referring to the feigned personas as “An imitation of a Light” (l. 15). The capitalized “L” in “Light” emphasizes the importance of the soul that lights up the eyes. This rather painful little metaphor speaks to the still prevalent struggle of the mentally ill, who feel the need to put on a façade as if they were healthy and whole, plastering on smiles. She wonders if years of this same monotonous pain eventually dull the edge of it (l. 20). She asks if time heals all wounds. She asks if this pain is eternal (l. 22). Dickinson is aware, through life experience and education, that suffering is widespread, common, human. She asks if those who suffer for centuries learn to accept that pain is greater than love (ll. 22-24).

Within this poem, Dickinson also identifies a handful of causes for depression: death, want, cold, despair, and alienation.

The Grieved – are many – I am told –
 There is the various Cause –
 Death – is but one – and comes but once –
 And only nails the eyes –
 There’s Grief of Want – and grief of Cold –
 A sort they call “Despair” –
 There’s Banishment from native Eyes –
 In sight of Native Air – (ll. 25-32)

She spells out all of these causes of grief. Death, unsurprisingly, receives the most attention. She admits that everyone must endure this pain, but only once. All the griefs she identifies are ancient and universal ailments, the curses of humanity that can never be eliminated. The speaker of the poem admits that she cannot truly understand the hardships of others, and consequently

admits that no one can understand her pain either. The irregular, slanting rhymes that Dickinson uses in this poem are a brilliant example of how grief is not neat and clean, it is not something that can be easily wrapped up and sung about.

She is, however, able to confess to the consolation that is brought to her by the knowledge that others share in her suffering. She calls it a “piercing Comfort” (l. 35), an oxymoron which also obliquely references the pain of Christ. Her quiet nod to Calvary suggests that she takes comfort in sharing the pain born by Jesus on the cross, or perhaps she thinks that her pain is equal. Maybe she resents the fact that she feels such intense pain, if Jesus died to forgive her, should not her pain have been removed? She concludes the poem with a few last observations on the pervasiveness of pain. She states that she is “Still fascinated to presume / That Some – are like my own –“ (ll. 39-40) speaking directly to the very human need for company and for empathy. There is comfort in knowing you are not alone. This simple statement fully explains the importance of discussing mental health. It is the knowledge that she is not entirely unique or even that out of the ordinary that to Dickinson is her saving grace. This solidarity is what allows her to keep going.

One of those fellow sufferers, living at the same time, was a young man in the Netherlands who was growing to become one of the greatest artists who ever lived. Vincent van Gogh, the son of a pastor, was born in 1853 and raised in the city of Zundert alongside his five younger siblings. Vincent was encouraged by his father to pursue a career in ministry while his art-dealing uncles wanted him to work for them and enter the art world. Vincent followed both of these paths at different points in his life. He began working at the age of sixteen and moved around a lot in pursuit of career opportunities, living for a time in London, Brussels, and various cities in the Netherlands. A series of failed jobs and unsuccessful stints at seminaries left

Vincent feeling rather discouraged. He fell in and out of favor with his family, at times not speaking with one parent or sibling. Always, though, Vincent remained close to his beloved brother, Theo. Theo was four years younger than Vincent and, as an adult, worked in the art world. The brothers visited each other frequently and stayed in constant communication through letters.

These letters provide one of the greatest sources of insight into the life of the artist. It is thanks to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (commonly referred to as Jo), Theo's wife and Vincent's sister-in-law, that we have these letters. Theo passed away in January 1891, only six months after his brother Vincent had died, and so he was never able to take steps towards publishing Vincent's letters. Jo, though, found the letters that had been collected in a large desk and determined to share them with the world. She, like Theo, recognized the genius of her brother-in-law, and fought for his legacy. The letters were published in their entirety (in Dutch and French), in 1914 (xiii). Jo and her son, Dr. Vincent Willem Van Gogh, advocated for and edited Vincent's letters personally. It is largely because of her dedication to the letters, the introductory memoir she herself wrote as a preface, and her faith in Vincent's art that we know as much as we do about the man. When studied chronologically, the letters provide an understanding of the development of his illness and how the stages of his depression progressed. A rough timeline of the letters demonstrates the evolution of his disorder and how he understood it through brilliantly constructed metaphors tying his mental state with death, art, and nature.

The letters, which span from 1872 until the day he was fatally wounded in 1890, were always filled with references to art and little sketches, but it was not until 1879, at the age of twenty-six, that Vincent really decided to dedicate himself to art. This was also the time that Vincent began to note struggles with mental health. His state of mind was deteriorating, his

relationship with his family was strained, he was living in poverty and without work, but he had his paints. He wrote in a letter to Theo dated July 1880, "Well, right now it seems that things are going badly for me, have been doing so for some considerable time, and may continue to do so well into the future" (71). It is a pity how true this statement would prove to be. The next ten years of his short life were a contrast between heartbreak, hunger, and health issues, with the creation of some of the most beautiful paintings that the world has ever seen. Vincent, with his rather romantic view of life and his somewhat optimistic personality, always searched for the good in his situation, even in the times when it seemed hopeless. He believed, for a time, in divine providence. He believed that his lot in life could always improve or that he could strive to improve it himself. He believed that his pain could wane.

Vincent is typically taken as the quintessential example of the tortured artist. He is often portrayed as a mad genius. His battle with mental illness and his psychotic episodes are famously common knowledge. Popular opinion holds that Vincent was mad or that it was his well-known liking for absinthe that caused his hallucinations and the infamous self-mutilation of his ear. As is true of Emily Dickinson, many scholars have tried to diagnose Vincent and provide a medical basis for his suffering. Wilfred Arnold states, "Vincent's ailment was characterized by episodes of acute mental derangement and disability which were separated by intervals of lucidity and creativity" (25). These recorded periods of mental highs and lows have frequently led to a diagnosis of bipolar or some other mood disorder. He also suffered from gastrointestinal problems, hallucinations, partial seizures, overwork, malnutrition and alcohol abuse, and "incapacitating" depression (Arnold 25). Taking these into account along with his family history, one possible diagnosis for all of his symptoms is acute intermittent porphyria, a metabolic disease that is typically inherited and manifests almost all of the symptoms listed

(Arnold 22). There was a family history of similar illness, and Vincent's letters as well as doctor's notes corroborate such a diagnosis.

In the same July 1880 letter mentioned above, Vincent provides a definition for his understanding of depression and his mental disorders. He wrote that he was a "man of passions" and that this quality sometimes made other people view him as ridiculous (66). He describes experiencing melancholy, neglecting his physical appearance, viewing the future as "gloomy," and feeling empty (66-70). It is in a lengthy passage of this letter that he pens a poignant metaphor for his depression. He talks of feeling a sense of purpose but being unable to act on it. The metaphor he offers is that of a caged bird (74). He tells the story of a bird that is in captivity, that lives in a cage and does not have the means to build his own nest or to stretch his wings. Come spring, the bird knows he has a purpose and says,

"The others make their nests and lay their eggs and bring up their little ones," and so he knocks his head against the bars of the cage. But the cage remains, and the bird is maddened by anguish.

"Look at the lazy animal," says another bird that passes by, "he seems to be living at his ease." Yes, the prisoner lives, he does not die, there are no outward signs of what passes within him...

... And inwardly [he] rebels against his fate. "I am caged, I am caged, and you tell me I do not want anything, fools! You think I have everything I need! Oh! I beseech you, liberty, so that I can be a bird like other birds!"

A certain idle man resembles this idle bird. (Roskill 125-126)

This is a striking and poignant description of depression. Vincent speaks to the fact that depression does not present itself outwardly in the same way a physical illness might. He

addresses the pain of being mislabeled and judged for carrying the weight of mental illness and the distress it causes him to be viewed so negatively in the eyes of others. If Vincent himself is the bird that is caged, he is confessing that he is acutely aware that to an outside observer, he comes off as lazy, idle, incapable. He seeks freedom, but he is kept from it by forces outside of his control. He is restricted by a cage that they cannot see.

On top of his struggle with depression, Vincent's life was complicated by involvement in several tense relationships. His passionate temperament and mental health issues made him hard to handle at times. He and his father experienced a lot of ups and downs, oftentimes not speaking to each other for long periods. Many of Vincent's relationships with his family members were especially strained when he fell in love with his cousin, Kee Vos. He wrote of a falling out with his father, "I simply cannot agree that a father who curses his son and... proposes to send him to a lunatic asylum... and who calls his son's love 'inopportune and indelicate,' is in the right" (110). He confessed his love to Kee and in early November of 1881 wrote to Theo of how she rebuffed him saying, "Never, no, never." Vincent was heartbroken, but persistent. Vincent opened a November 18, 1881 letter to Theo by stating, "If I did not give vent to my feelings so often, then, I think, the boiler would burst" (109). Here, he explicitly states the intention of his letters – he needed them to provide an outlet for his emotions. The letters were a mode of verbal processing for Vincent. Not long after the incident with Kee, there followed a second, equally complicated romantic entanglement which left Vincent in an increasingly fragile state.

Vincent took great pity on a pregnant prostitute, called Sien, and determined to marry and provide for her. The two had a comfortable arrangement worked out, in which she would pose for him and he would support her financially (which really meant that Theo would support her,

as he supported Vincent) (153-160). Vincent contrasted the love he felt for Sien with his feelings for Kee. He had loved Kee passionately, but with Sien he felt a contented, familial love based on the mutual fulfilment of needs and companionship (165). He said of Sien, “She and I are two unhappy people who keep each other company and share a burden” (165).

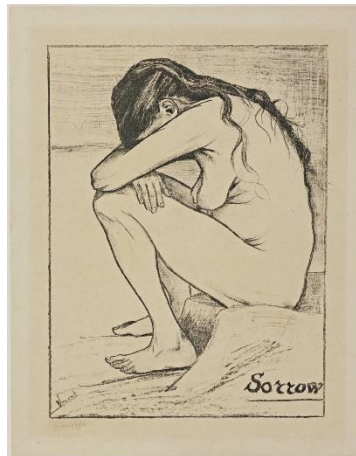


Fig. 1 Vincent van Gogh. *Sorrow*. 1882, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

It was during this relationship with Sien that he created drawings and a lithograph which he titled *Sorrow* (Gilman 113). This study (Fig. 1) depicts a naked, seated woman, Sien, with her face hanging in her hands, her body in a pose of utter dejection. She is reminiscent of the Renaissance depictions of melancholy in her posture and expression. In this piece, Vincent sought to capture “a figure weighed down by the world,” and he did (Gilman 115). This is an early example of Vincent visually displaying the kinship he felt with the depressed and the downtrodden. He saw this drawing as a step in the right direction towards achieving his goal: he wanted to make art that would touch people (177).

Vincent’s goal as an artist was to create something emotional. He sought to convey his deep feelings to the viewer in such a way that it would move them. In a letter dated 21 July 1882, he wrote, “I want to get to the point where people say of my work: that man feels deeply, that man feels keenly” (177-178). He was reaching for the same sense of universality that

Dickinson identified in her poems. The man was aware that he was different, strange, even using the word “eccentric” to describe himself (178). He knew that people looked down on him and regarded him with disdain, that his difficult temperament and regular depressive episodes made him hard to deal with. He felt that did not matter, though, if he could succeed in pouring the emotions trapped within himself onto a page or a canvas (178). For him, the act of creation was how he could “fight my fight quietly” against not only his illness but the stigma surrounding it (182).

One of the diagnoses that has been assigned to him repeatedly is bipolar disorder. Much like Dickinson, patterns of manic and depressive states can be tracked through his productivity and letters. For example, his faltering relationships with his family and with Sien could demonstrate the transition from a manic high to a depressive low. Sien was a prostitute, an alcoholic, desperately poor, and pregnant when Vincent met her, yet he idealized her to an extreme. In a letter dated 6 July 1882, Vincent said, “And no matter what Sien’s past may have been, I know no other Sien than the one from last winter, than that mother in the hospital whose hand pressed mine” (175). After a significant relationship, Vincent abandoned Sien and set out on his own. Sometime after he left, he wrote, “I knew from the start that her character was tainted but I had hoped it could be reformed, and now that I no longer see her and can ponder some of the things I saw in her, I am more and more convinced that she was too far gone to be reformed” (240). This shift in his attitude towards her and their situation could indicate a drop from the high he had been riding to a depressive low (Hemphill 29).

The guilt that Vincent felt over deserting Sien coupled with the loneliness that resulted from living on his own sent him into a downward spiral. In one particularly painful letter to Theo, Vincent showed how low he had become in his musings about his ill health. He wrote in

an August 1883 letter that he expected his body would hold up for six to ten more years. He was thirty years old at the time and lived only seven years longer (229). He wrote, “I do not intend to spare myself, to avoid emotions or difficulties – it makes comparatively little difference to me whether I go on living for a shorter or longer time” (229).



Fig. 2 Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait in Front of the Easel*. 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Clearly, many of the metaphors that he used to understand depression revolved around nature, and this is no real surprise considering how highly he valued the natural world. He possessed a very romantic ideation and adoration of nature. He compared his mental disorders to birds, storms, dogs, and winter, but he also compared them to death. In a letter to Theo he described his own *Self-Portrait in Front of the Easel* (Fig. 2), saying it showed the artist with a “pinkish-grey face and green eyes, ash-coloured hair, wrinkles on his forehead and around the mouth, stiff, wooden, a very red beard, fairly untidy and sad-looking.” He said it may remind Theo of the “face of Death,” that was how he saw himself (367). He was thirty-five years old. He painted his young face grey and wrinkled; his hair is faded and ashy, and his body is rigid, showing signs of age, decay, even death.

Much in the same way that Dickinson viewed poetry as an outlet for her grief, Vincent saw painting as his best way to cope. But while painting healed him, it also depleted his energy. He rather poetically commiserated with Theo about this loss of self:

You mention the emptiness you sometimes feel, and that's exactly what I feel myself...
 If a painter ruins himself emotionally by working hard at his painting, and renders himself unfit for so much else, for family life &c., &c., if, consequently, he paints not only with colour but with self-sacrifice and self-denial and a broken heart... [it] costs you... this half-deliberate, half-accidental eclipse of your personality. (380-381)

Painting was Vincent's downfall as much as it was his salvation. The dedication with which he poured himself into this cure for his depression was so demanding and all-consuming that it drained all else from his being.

Another act aimed at salvation that was equally damaging was Vincent's move to Arles in the south of France. It can be inferred from Vincent's letters that perhaps he, like Dickinson, suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder. He had in previous letters recommended spring air and sunshine to help treat Theo's depression (354). He wrote from Arles, where he had moved in a bid to improve his health, that "the air here is definitely doing me good" (345). He also wrote of the sun and the weather as a metaphor for his moods and health. He often referred to his episodes of anxiety and mental exhaustion as storms. The sun was, to him, a god, saving him from the cold and depression of winter. It is also of note that his oft referenced favorite color was the color of sunshine: chrome yellow, which he used for his glowing sunflowers. He wrote that one should

be clearly aware of the stars and the infinity on high. Then life seems almost enchanted after all. Ah, those who don't believe in the sun here are quite godless. Unfortunately, along with the good god sun, there is the devil mistral 3 quarters of the time. (392)

This "devil mistral" could easily be interpreted as a reference to the colder months of fall, winter, and spring. The grey clouds and cold wetness of European winters were oppressive to Vincent. He was inspired by the warmth in Arles, and perhaps by a rise into a manic period, to enter into one of his most creative times. He applied himself wholly to his art, working for nine weeks alongside Gauguin who had come to live with him at the Yellow House. The Yellow House was the house in Arles that Vincent hoped would become a sort of commune for artists, which he had painted his favorite color and decorated with a series of paintings: *Sunflowers*.

Vincent's health, though, was not perfect in Arles. He described to Theo "an extraordinary spell of feverish activity" being poured onto his canvases (413). His high made him extremely productive, but he barely ate, drank too much (and usually absinthe at that, which is believed to have hallucinogenic properties), and was always physically exhausted from his hours spent at the easel. He saw his own reflection in his paintings, too, and not just in his self-portraits. He said of his well-known *Night Café* that a critic may find it a "raging case of delirium tremens" (399). He found the painting ugly, bold, almost offensive with its heavy-handed colors and contrasts. He wrote to Theo, in his description of the painting, "I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can destroy oneself," and that is exactly what he did (399).

23 December 1888 was the date of the famous episode which resulted in Vincent cutting off a piece of the lobe of his own ear, so frequently referenced in popular culture. "Van Gogh's own letters offer no more than a weak echo of the events," concedes the editor of his letters, and

he was hesitant to write about how bad things had become, frequently downplaying the drama of the night (426). He said to Theo, “I hope that I have had no more than a perfectly ordinary attack of artistic temperament,” clearly believing that his vocation justified his seeming insanity (426). Oddly, he seems to miss the oxymoron of describing an attack as being “perfectly ordinary.” The way he saw it, his art not only contributed to but excused his ill health.

In a sort of apology letter to Gauguin, who had abandoned the Yellow House and fled Arles after their infamous fight, Vincent returned to a lovely metaphor that he had hinted at briefly in a few letters over the years. Vincent compared himself with a ship, sailing over the rough seas of mental illness.

In my mental or nervous fever, or madness – I am not too sure how to put it or what to call it – my thoughts sailed over many seas. I even dreamed of the phantom Dutch ship and of *Le Horla*, and it seems that, while thinking what the woman rocking the cradle sang to rock the sailors to sleep, I, who on other occasions cannot even sing a note, came out with an old nursery tune, something I had tried to express in an arrangement of colours before I fell ill. (430)

This beautifully haunting passage reveals the extent of Vincent’s illness. Whether it was intentional or not, he confesses to the hallucinations he suffered while under the spell of his fever and the effects they had on him.

At this time, Vincent began to consider voluntarily going to stay at a mental institution called St. Rémy for a time, an idea that Theo supported. Vincent had begun making peace with his condition. He noted that he was beginning to view “madness” as any other disease, an important step in understanding mental disorders (435). He viewed the hospital as a possible cure, but it only exacerbated his guilt over Theo’s financial support. However, it was also at this

time that Vincent began making occasional, casual reference to suicide in his letters. This naturally caused Theo great anxiety, but Vincent repeatedly assured him there was no reason to worry (435).

In May of 1889, Vincent was accepted as a patient at St. Rémy. He felt he was growing stronger while in the hospital and wrote optimistically to Theo of his recovery, though he knew he would never again be entirely well. While in the asylum he painted some of his greatest works, including the iconic *Starry Night*. However, in July the illness returned, and Vincent suffered an attack even more violent than the last. This episode was when he put dirt and paint into his mouth and drank turpentine, which some have interpreted as a suicide attempt (449). Vincent was terrified. He was not able to write of the events until the middle of August and when he did, he described them as “frightful” (449). The doctors would not let Vincent paint for a time after the attack, which he felt hurt him more than it helped.



Fig. 3 Vincent van Gogh. *Self-Portrait*. 1889, Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo.

It has recently been revealed, however, that there may have been a singular exception to this painting ban. There is a popular misconception about Vincent that imagines him as a frantic, enraged painter. Common visions of him at his easel portray a man dashing paint onto the canvas haphazardly and with a slightly mad air about him. In truth, Vincent was a very methodical man and did not paint when he was actively ill. Painting was his career, his

livelihood, it was not something that he did brashly in a furor but something that required painstaking attention to detail and intentional brushstrokes. However, an exciting new study out of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam has unearthed evidence of a singularly unique portrait (Fig. 3). *Self-Portrait (1889)*, housed in a museum in Oslo, has been an object of controversy for some decades. On 20 January 2020, the museum proudly announced in a press release that the portrait “really is by Vincent van Gogh.” The museum’s press release states that

the Oslo self-portrait firmly depicts someone who is mentally ill. Van Gogh portrayed himself with his head slightly bowed and his body turned somewhat away from the viewer. His timid, sideways glance is easily recognizable and is often found in patients suffering from depression and psychosis. The expression on his face is lifeless and the image as a whole is dominated by a brownish-green, downbeat tone. (“Contested Self-Portrait”)

This is a radical and important discovery, as it is “the only work he is known to have painted while suffering from psychosis.” Vincent briefly referenced the portrait in a letter to Theo on 20 September 1889, a few weeks into his recovery from the prolonged episode (“Contested Self-Portrait”). For van Gogh scholars and enthusiasts, this portrait reveals so much about the state of the artist during one of his psychotic episodes. His expression is browbeaten and worn, his face is tense, his eyes cast low and with an unmistakable emotion of sadness.



Fig. 4 Vincent van Gogh. *Wheatfield with a Reaper*. 1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

When his brushes were eventually returned to him on a more permanent basis, he picked up where he had left off, painting constantly. He wrote in a letter in early September of 1889, less than a year before his death, of a painting that he had begun before his attack and was now continuing, all in yellow, *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (Fig. 4).

For I see in this reaper – a vague figure toiling away for all he’s worth in the midst of the heat to finish his task – I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping... But there is no sadness in this death, this one takes place in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold. (451-452)

Vincent was this reaper. He was out in the field, toiling tirelessly to create and to put his vision onto canvas. He foreshadowed his own suicide in the middle of a golden field less than a year after this letter was written. Vincent put his feelings about work and about death and about his sadness onto the page and into his paintings. The letter he wrote to Theo was only slightly more explicit of his emotion than the painting itself. As far as he was concerned, death and sadness were foregone conclusions, the only solace was working hard and painting well until he was consumed.

Vincent was aware of the irony of a man like himself painting such beautiful things. He wrote of the sunny, golden tones of *Wheatfield with a Reaper*, “I find it odd that I saw it like that

through the iron bars of a cell” (456). The meaning of this statement is two-fold. It is odd that Vincent was able to see and paint such beauty from behind literal barred windows in the hospital. Not only that, though, it is doubly inspiring that he could create what he did looking out from the cage of his depression. If one looks back to his letter years previous in which he likened himself to a bird in a cage, we see another set of bars preventing Vincent from seeing the beauty of the world. In spite of the heavy iron bars of his seizures, stomach problems, bipolar disorder, seasonal depression, hallucinations, and anxiety, he was able to see the natural world in colors such as no one else has ever seen.

For Vincent, as for Dickinson, depression was a weight, a shroud, an impediment standing in the way of their living complete lives. Bipolar disorder, major depression, and seasonal affective disorder radically impacted the lives of both of them, even if they defined and spoke about their mental illnesses differently. The metaphor of death is common for both of them. It is clear from their poems and letters that the feeling of dying and decay is universal among those suffering from depression. Contemplations of suicide also creep into the writings of both, as one simple solution to their despair. Vincent writes about immobility similarly to how Dickinson describes it in poem 510, each of them physically held down by the weight of their mind.

There is also an interesting overlap between the two of them with boat or shipping metaphors. The end of Dickinson’s poem 510 uses the metaphor of a ship lost at sea to describe her feelings of hopelessness, “But most, like Chaos – Stopless – cool – / Without a Chance, or spar – / Or even a Report of Land –“ Similarly, Vincent wrote in the passage quoted previously of how in his madness his mind “sailed over many seas” (430). This shared metaphor likens

depression to a vast, dark, untamable sea. Depression is an ocean of mental anguish that cannot be controlled or held back, the sufferer can only hope that their boat does not crash and sink.

They also both make continual pained references to winter, backing a diagnosis of SAD for each of them. This disorder lent each of them a natural and more literal metaphor to explain what they felt. Dickinson and van Gogh were able to make this connection to the oppression of cold and cloud to the worsening of their conditions, even if they did not have the medical term “seasonal affective disorder” to define why or how the changing seasons could have such an effect on them. Poem 258 is a full discussion of the weight of winter and many of Vincent’s letters from the south harp on about the restorative effects of summer sun.

Dickinson also focused heavily on the metaphors of cold and night in her poetry, among others, of course. She was fixated on the idea of depression being dark, freezing, and heavy. It was through these senses that she tried to express what it is to be depressed. She chose feelings and events that can be experienced by anyone – coldness, darkness, seasonal change – and used those sensations to attempt to communicate what her mental illness felt like to others. Vincent, too, chose observable images for his metaphors, though he looked to the natural world for his imagery. As with his painting, Vincent took inspiration from nature when crafting metaphors for depression and anxiety, talking about birds, dogs, winds, and the sun. He put his astute observational skills to use as a method for expressing his experience in terms that could be understood by others.

For both of these brilliantly creative individuals, mental illness was a weight they carried with them all their lives. In the late 1800’s, there was not the same general understanding of mental health and psychology that we have today. There was no common language for people to express or understand mental illness. For this reason, Emily Dickinson and Vincent van Gogh

turned to art to process their major depression, bipolar disorders, and seasonal affective disorders. Dickinson wrote poetry constructed with metaphors intended to explain what depression, manic phases, anxiety, and SAD feel like. Van Gogh's paintings were his prime method of self-expression, but his deeply confessional letters to his brother were another sort of canvas for his own nature-based metaphors. To this day, people who struggle with mental disorders of their own can find comfort by reading these poems and letters. They are a language that can be heard, understood, and spoken by a modern audience.

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