



Vincent van Gogh. *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 74 cm x 92 cm.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Anne Sexton’s “The Starry Night”: A Poetic Response to Van Gogh’s Masterpiece

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Abstract

Ekphrastic poetry is a poetic reinterpretation of a visual artwork. There are numerous poems, songs, and lyrics written with inspiration from paintings, sculptures, or photographs. An ekphrastic poem can immortalize a work of art adding a new perspective to it. This paper looks at the tradition of Ekphrastic poetry as a genre and explores Vincent van Gogh’s famous painting The Starry Night through the light of Anne Sexton’s popular ekphrastic poem “The Starry Night”. It observes how Sexton’s poem artfully attempts to capture the spirit of Van Gogh’s painting through words. It also suggests how combining poetry with visual art can enrich both art and literature.

Keywords: confessional poet, ekphrastic, post-impressionism, visual art

Literature and visual art are two equally potent forms of human expression. These two creative realms, seemingly distinct, can create magic beyond boundaries when united. The ties between a piece of literature and a visual artwork have long been a popular topic in academic discourse. Whether it is a literary work or a visual creation, both genres demand creativity, imagination, and an eye for aesthetics. A writer carefully selects and combines words and texts while an artist lavishes brushstrokes of different hues to create patterns and forms. Both creators aim to craft a mental and visual "image" for their respective audiences and readers.

Where art has been a source of inspiration for poets; poetry has likewise inspired artists for centuries. Many poetic works have in turn been inspired by paintings and sculptures, further cementing that poetry and visual art can create a powerful combination. This interplay between visual art and poetry has given birth to a genre called ‘Ekphrastic Poetry.’ The article attempts to offer a brief introduction to ekphrastic poetry with a critical perusal of Anne Sexton’s enigmatic poem “The Starry Night”, inspired by great post-impressionist artist Vincent van Gogh’s iconic painting of the same title.



Vincent van Gogh. *Self-portrait*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Ekphrastic poetry is a form of poetry that describes a work of art, often a painting, sculpture, or other visual piece. Ekphrastic poems provide detailed and vivid descriptions of the artwork, allowing readers to visualize it even if they have not seen the original piece. It also allows poets to explore and respond to visual art through words. The term 'Ekphrasis' comes from the Greek word – "ek" meaning "out" and "phrasis," meaning "speak" or "tell." In ekphrasis, poets often interpret the artwork, offering their own perspective or emotional response to it. These poems often establish an emotional connection between the viewer (or reader) and the artwork, helping to convey the poet's own feelings in addition to the artist's original intentions.

Poetry and painting rely on two different forms of media. The first being language and the second is line and colour. Nonetheless, the two media share many of the same principles and thus have numerous facets in common (Young 2015). Notably, visual arts – paintings and sculpture – have inspired poets and served as a source of poetic creation. A painting, sculpture, or even a photograph can evoke strong emotions in poets leading them to interpret and transform it into written words. Poetry can enhance the understanding of a piece of visual art by providing context, historical background, or even a personal perspective. It can help viewers appreciate the artwork on a deeper level.

The practice of describing visual art through words can be traced to even earlier cultures. Its rich history extends back to ancient Greece. Plato had already hinted at the unique similarity between poetry and art in the 5th century BCE. In one of the dialogues addressed to his disciple Phaedrus, Plato said:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence. And so it is with written words; you might think they spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have

no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (Plato, n.d., Phaedrus - 275c)

The earlier Greek poets like Homer and Hesiod have often left elaborate descriptions of artworks in their epic poems. During the Roman period, Latin poets like Virgil and Ovid continued to incorporate ekphrasis into their works. Virgil's "Aeneid" contains descriptions of artwork, while Ovid's "Metamorphoses" offers ekphrastic accounts of various mythological scenes. Coming to the 19th and 20th-centuries, ekphrastic poetry seems to have gained a new height of popularity once again. Poets like John Keats ("Ode on a Grecian Urn"), W. H. Auden ("Musé des Beaux-Arts"), Edwin Markham ("The Man with the Hoe"), and William Carlos Williams ("Landscape with the Fall of Icarus") contribute to making this genre rich by producing great works of English ekphrastic poetry (Rajbhandari 2016: 90-95).

It is also noteworthy that poets like William Blake illustrated their own poems, blending words and images while artists like Caspar David Friedrich sought motifs for their landscapes from Wordsworth's poetic wanderings. Modern and contemporary poets have further continued to explore the relationship between visual and literary art, responding to various forms of artwork, including paintings, sculptures, and photographs. Pablo Picasso, for example, drew inspiration

from African masks, while T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" echoed fragmented Cubist perspectives. In Young's (2015) words, "The Waste Land" resembles some aspects of the Cubist practice in painting, in particular Picasso's painting, and claims that the poem is part of the Cubist movement in the 20th century." Likewise, James Joyce's experimental novel Ulysses parallels the abstract visions of Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky.

In modern days, if there is any artwork that has been successful in evoking multiple poetic responses, it is arguably Vincent van Gogh's masterpiece "The Starry Night". The painting has attracted many poets and songwriters to pen their poetic impressions on it. "The Starry Night" was a great artwork painted by the Dutch artist in 1889, thirteen months before his suicide. In those days he was admitted to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France. It was a turbulent period in his life when he struggled with his mental health. He suffered from several mental disorders including depression, psychotic episodes, delusions, and bipolar disorder. From battling mental health issues, Van Gogh is credited with producing a staggering 2,100 artworks, 860 being oil paintings (Dutta 2023). His erratic mental state and his struggles are often reflected in his art.

"The Starry Night" is an oil painting depicting a vibrant night scene viewed from the east-facing window of Van Gogh's asylum room in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Drawn partly from his

observation and partly from his memory, the painting depicts the town of Saint-Rémy and its night sky. The painting is characterized by its swirling, turbulent composition and vivid, vibrant colour patterns. The painting depicts the enchanting night sky in blues and blacks brimming with whirling clouds, bright yellow-white stars, and a bright crescent moon against a silent village (or town) with church steeples and houses. A cypress tree, set against a backdrop of a swirling night sky seems to connect the earth and sky in the foreground adding an effect of movement and vitality. Its swirling brushwork and vibrant colours convey a sense of movement and emotion. “Dominated by blues, the painting blends the rolling hills seamlessly into the night sky. The village below rests peacefully in sombre browns, greys, and blues. But it’s the heavens that truly captivate. Stars, rendered in a vibrant dance of yellows and whites, pierce the darkness, drawing the viewer’s gaze upwards” (Dutta 2023).

This 74 cm x 92 cm-sized painting is often interpreted as a reflection of the emotional turmoil that Van Gogh was going through during that period. The painting is rich in its symbolism. The turbulent sky may symbolize the artist's inner turmoil, while the solitary cypress tree in the foreground may symbolize his feelings of alienation. The stars and moon suggest hope and transcendence. What makes this painting so compelling is its dynamic brushstrokes of bold and contrasting colours evoking a sense of awe. According to art historian Sven

Loevgren (1971), *The Starry Night* is a "visionary painting" that "was conceived in a state of great agitation". This masterwork of Van Gogh is now on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Taking inspiration from this magnum opus, twentieth-century poet Anne Sexton composed a poem on the same title in 1961. A key figure in the confessional poetry movement, Sexton had a significant influence on contemporary poetry. Born in 1928, Sexton began writing poetry as a result of an emotional breakdown that led to serious depression. She wrote confessional and emotionally charged poetry that delved into personal and often autobiographical themes. Her poetry frequently explored the themes of mental illness, despair, and recovery with a focus on her personal experiences, relationships, and psychological battles against life’s challenges.

Sexton's poem “*The Starry Night*” is a verbal refashioning of Van Gogh’s painting. It is, in fact, a painting in words capturing the spirit of Van Gogh’s canvas. The poem invites the readers to explore the details of Van Gogh’s masterpiece. It delves into the emotional unrest and mental struggles of the artist. Connecting the inner world to the swirling, tumultuous sky in the painting, the poem alludes to the trauma the painter is suffering in his life and perhaps in Sexton’s own life too. Just like Van Gogh's painting, the poem explores the themes of inner turmoil and darkness juxtaposed with the beauty and

mystery of the night sky. It reflects the emotional and psychological struggles of the speaker passing through a trauma. Sexton's choice of words resembles the brushstrokes of the painter, evoking a sense of beauty, melancholy, and isolation. The same level of movement and the intensity of the artwork can be felt in Sexton's selection of words. Like Van Gogh's painting, Sexton's poem also plays with symbolism. It does not simply portray the haunting beauty of the night sky but creates a metaphor for chaotic life and the vastness of the universe.

“The Starry Night” opens with an epigraph. Sexton excerpts a quotation from a letter by Van Gogh to his beloved brother Theo van Gogh - “That does not keep me from having a terrible need of—shall I say the word—religion. Then I go out at night to paint the stars. Vincent van Gogh in a letter to his brother.” Indicating the source of inspiration for the poem at the very outset, the epigraph helps readers connect the poem straight with the painting of the great master. Aunye Boone (2023) aptly writes, “In this poem, Anne Sexton uses figurative language to describe the stars and the sky and provides insight into the turbulent inner thoughts of Vincent van Gogh. Sexton also intertwines excerpts from Van Gogh's personal letters, wherein he expresses his inclination to paint the stars when sadness befalls him.”

A tone of fantasy pervades the poem from the very outset. The opening lines of the poem give a hint that it is not the real world the speaker sees in the painting but an imaginary one:

The town does not exist

*except where one black-haired tree
slip*

*up like a drowned woman into the hot
sky.*

*The town is silent. The night boils
with eleven stars.*

(Sexton 1981: lines 1-4)

The focal point of the painting seems to be the night sky. The speaker finds the depiction of the town on the canvas quite insignificant in comparison to the starry sky and dark trees in the foreground. The town is silent and lacks liveliness. The figurative descriptions such as “black haired tree”, and “a woman drowned in the hot sky” add a mystical quality to the poem. It is as if a drowned woman's hair was floating around underwater. Likewise, the image “The night that boils” leaves an impression of a heated mental state of the speaker.

However, the stars appear as beacons of hope amidst suffering. Like Van Gogh, Sexton's speaker seeks solace in the starry expanse, establishing a communion with the universe. Yet amidst the movement of the stars in the sky, she feels lonely. She finds herself lost in the cosmic maze. A sudden death wish slips into the mind of the speaker.

“... suicide becomes the solution to get to a better place, away from meaninglessness, depression, and pain. In that case, one would dream the night, by looking at the moon and announcing with a loud proud voice to “the Starry night”,

telling it how much s/he is longing to die..." (Madi and Neimneh: 2015). Clearly, this foreshadows an omen of the poet's unnatural death to take place at the age of 45.

Oh starry night! This is how

I want to die.

It moves. They are all alive.

(Sexton, 1981, lines 5-7)

Next, the speaker views the moon as something that "bulges in its orange irons" and "like a god" that pushes "children...from its eye." This cryptic interpretation of the painting leaves an impression that the moon as the mother of smaller stars is pushing her children:

Even the moon bulges in its orange
irons

to push children, like a god, from its
eye. (Sexton 1981: lines 8-79)

The speaker goes on to imagine an invisible snake devouring the stars and reiterates her death wish. She sees the swirls as a "beast" and a "great dragon" and wants to dissolve into the enchanting starry night. These metaphors successfully bring up an intense reaction of the poet to the starry night. She longs for an oblivious death without any formal rituals symbolized by "flag", "belly", and "cry".

*The old unseen serpent swallows up
the stars.*

Oh starry starry night! This is how

I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,

*sucked up by that great dragon, to
split*

from my life with no flag,

no belly,

no cry.

(Sexton 1981: lines 10-17)

Both Sexton and Van Gogh share an obsessive fascination with the night sky. For them, the night becomes a gateway to the cosmic union. Although Van Gogh and Sexton lived in different eras and worked in different mediums, they share some resemblances in terms of their emotional expression and mental health struggles. Just as Van Gogh painted the best of his works while he was undergoing psychiatric treatment in the asylum, Sexton also wrote poetry as a therapy to heal her mental illness. By choosing Van Gogh's painting as the subject of her poetic contemplation, Sexton might be trying to share her empathy with her fellow sufferer. For both of them, art seems to serve as a company and consolation at the phase of alienation. Ironically, like Van Gogh and Sexton also chose to end her life by committing suicide at an early age.

Thus, Sexton's poem on the maestro of Post-Impressionism, Vincent van Gogh's work offers a new perspective to comprehend an ekphrastic work. Just as the well-crafted visual narratives of Van Gogh's painting, Sexton's poem

too evokes emotions in the form of words. The study of these two different genres offers insight into how combining poetry with visual art can create a multi-sensory experience for the audience. It proves that words and images together can evoke a more profound emotional response while enriching each other at the same time.

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The Poet: **Anne Sexton** (1928 – 1974)