

## Critical Analysis of “The Scream”

“The Scream”, sometimes known as “The Cry” was painted by Edvard Munch in 1893. Some say Munch played a role in the development of German Expressionism, though the Norwegian painter turned down two offers to join the group, and preferred not to be classified, or ‘put’ into a category. This painting was part of Munch’s “The Frieze of Life”, a series of paintings each portraying a phase of life – as defined by Munch: Birth of Love, Blossoming and Dissolution of Love, Anguish of Life, and Death. The eleven paintings – “The Kiss”, “Madonna”, “Ashes”, “Dance of Life”, “Melancholy”, “Red Virginia Creeper”, “The Scream”, “Death in the Sick-Room”, “Puberty”, “Moonlight”, and “The Sick Child” – are as moving today as they were a hundred years ago when the motifs were first conceived.

Munch finished “The Scream” in 1893. It was a work of great personal meaning to him. The painting was like the culmination of all the tragic and harrowing events in his life. When Munch was aged only five years old, his Mother died from Tuberculosis. Nine years later, his favourite sister Sophie dies from tuberculosis also, at the age of 15. Frequent illnesses prevent him from attending Technical college in Christiania (Oslo). In 1889, he is hit with perhaps the biggest blow so far: his beloved father dies. Munch wrote:

*“And I live with the dead ones; my mother, my sister, my grandfather, my father— he, especially. Every memory, every little thing, they all come back to me in flocks. I can see him again as I saw him for the last time four months ago, when he told me goodbye on the bench; we were a little bit shy, we didn't want to betray the pain that this separation was causing to us. How much we loved each other in spite of everything, how much he worried at night for me, for my life - because I couldn't share his faith”*



Therefore, it is not surprising that the mood of the painting is so haunting. Munch painted it surrounded by morbidity. The point in the painting where we see the figures, was a road on top of a hill looking over Christiania and the harbour. On one side of the hill was a psychiatric hospital where one of his sisters had been sent, and on the other side, an abattoir. Munch described the feeling he experienced in a diary entry in his literary diary in Nice, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1892:

*"I was walking along the road with two friends.  
The sun was setting.  
I felt a breath of melancholy -  
Suddenly the sky turned blood-red.  
I stopped, and leaned against the railing, deathly tired -  
looking out across the flaming clouds that hung like blood and a sword  
over the blue-black fjord and town.  
My friends walked on - I stood there, trembling with fear.  
And I sensed a great, infinite scream pass through nature."*

The place obviously brought to life terrible memories, and the feelings Munch had here inspired his painting.

The layout of the piece itself is interesting. In the foreground, on a road with a railing along it, we see a figure: his hands raised to his head, eyes staring, mouth gaping. Further back are two gentlemen in top hats, and behind them a landscape of fjord and hills. The gentlemen behind are Munch's two friends, who were with him on the hill when he felt the "*great, infinite scream*". The painting is almost a self-portrait. One could say that the screaming figure was a representation of Munch, and it would be partly true, but I feel that the figure is not really a representation of anything visible, or human, instead it represents a sound, in this case a terrifying scream that came as much from inside Munch as from his surroundings. The figure is neither male, nor female. It is asexual, maybe a reflection of the way he is feeling after the breakdown of his relationship.

When art historians call Munch, together with artists like Van Gogh, "the founder of *Expressionism*", it is because of a picture such as *The Scream*. The work depicts not so much an incident or a landscape as a state of mind. The drama is an inner one, and yet the subject is firmly anchored in the physical surroundings of Oslo - the view is from Nordstrand towards the two bays at the head of the Oslofjord, with Holmenkollen in the background. The evening landscape, painted as an abstract rhythm of wavy lines, broke the Victorian mould of very beautiful, realistic sunsets. Munch confirms, in his writings, how to paint means to *remember*; and thus he always affirmed that things must be painted *the way we see them*, and not the way they are, to paint according to our moods, "*to the moment of the day*", to our mind's needs. Munch does not paint from observing nature, but rather his paintings recall sorrowful situations in his life; every painting concerns, if not a particular situation, then a painful feeling from his life. Those "regular presences" that we permanently see in Munch's works are born from his past, and from the memories, and personal ghosts that there reside : deathbeds, women and men in tears, sick women. "The Scream" is a typical example of this 'thesis'. Here, Munch paints a sound, a feeling, a personal experience, rather than a person. When he painted "The Scream", his affair had just collapsed. It is a cry of anxiety, of stress, and that could explain why it is so popular now. People can relate to the feeling of helplessness, and of something inside that wants to explode out. Perhaps the existential fear rendered by Munch has become more widespread in recent years.

The road with its railing, leading diagonally inwards, creates a powerful pull of perspective in the composition, and intensifies the disquieting atmosphere in the picture. Munch's use of perspective in this painting again 'rebels' against the expectations of the time.

The subject of the painting is fear. Although it is impossible to determine why, there is no mistaking the fact that the person in this painting is terrified. The body bends and twists as a scream builds and erupts from deep within. It is a scream so piercing that the figure clasps its hands tightly over its ears. The entire scene vibrates with the intensity of this scream - it echoes across the landscape, and the ominous water ripples out behind the figure like the sound waves of the scream.

In 1893, when Munch first exhibited "The Scream" in Oslo, it was met by much opposition because of its nature. Nothing like that had been painted before, in the 1800's, paintings were expected to be lifelike, "women knitting" as Munch noted in his writings once. Munch effectively, and maybe reluctantly, started the Expressionist movement in Art, a movement where painters, writers and poets were encouraged to portray what *they* saw, and not what they were *expected* to see. When it was exhibited, "The Scream" didn't meet with public demand, and so was not at all popular. Munch was very upset by this, and moved to Berlin, where his work was found to be more acceptable.

In Germany, he influenced two German expressionist groups, *Die Brücke* and *Die Blaue Reiter*. He had two offers from *Die Blaue Reiter* to join them, but he turned both down. Painting was for Munch a personal experience, and he did not like to share it, or put his works into any grouping.

The painting itself looks quite 'slapdash', as though it was rushed. The thick streaks of oil paint give the effect of a movement blur, like the world was swirling around the figure. It is hard to distinguish between the water and the land, difficult to recognize where the hills in the background stop and the sunset begins.

"The Scream" is a painting full of emotion, full of character not understood at the time of its birth. It reflects Munch's life at that time, all the Death and anxiety that makes the painting so mysterious and haunting, whilst also lively. When I look at it, I feel I can hear the scream echoing from it. The screaming figure draws the attention of the onlooker, but other aspects of the painting are just as interesting.

Whilst we cannot know what was going through Munch's mind when he painted "The Scream", we can guess that the painting evokes all the pain he was feeling.