

Expressive Critical Essay

An analysis of two works by
Edvard Munch.

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INTRODUCTION

In the following essays I am going to analyse two paintings, 'The Scream' (1893) and 'Evening on Karl Johan' (1892), by Norwegian Expressionist artist, Edvard Munch (1863-1944). These two works come from Munch's 'Frieze of Life' series of paintings in particular the 'Fear of Life'. A large part of Munch's life was occupied by painting and his work can be divided up into four thematic approaches: 'Loves Awakening', 'Love Blossoms and Dies', 'Fear of Life' and 'Death'.

Munch's aunt was responsible for encouraging him in his artistic career after his mother and sister died when he was young. Similarly with his father being a doctor, Munch was further exposed to death and dying. The tragic events of his early life undoubtedly affected Munch throughout his life, certainly he found it difficult to form relationships with women. Munch is regarded as being an Expressionist artist, as he manages to convey extreme negative emotions, especially his futility of life and existence.

‘THE SCREAM’ EDVARD MUNCH (1893)

At first glance, I am immediately drawn to the emaciated melting figure, in particular the face which glares at the viewer with a gaping mouth, hands clasped to its skull-like visage. The strange looking figure is undoubtedly the focal point, situated in the immediate foreground. Then our eye takes in the rest of the painting. My eyes follow a route anti-clockwise, beginning from the screaming figure, along the dramatically angled planks of the bridge to the two anonymous, almost transparent figures in the middle distance who are cut off by the edge of the picture frame. Then our eye flows across the undulating sky which seems to merge with, and into the water and landscape below and we return back at this solitary figure. I find it difficult to leave this image as my eye continuously moves round and round. I am prevented from leaving the boundaries of the painting by the cut-off figures on the left and the vertical post on the right, which runs the length of the canvas. These act as stops to prevent our eye wandering off and out of the canvas.

It is possible to assume Edvard Munch, the painter, is the character who is screaming and that these waves of lines and blend of colours represent turmoil; this turmoil being in the figure's or Munch's head. What suggests this to me is the fact that the lines that flow around the painting always lead to the head of the figure. Everything around the figure appears to represent the thoughts mixed up inside his head. The whirlpool suggests the confused mind of the person, almost like havoc, causing him to scream as if it is driving him mad. The reason I interpreted this, was that Munch also manages to keep me a little focussed on the whirlpool as well as the screaming figure, suggesting to me a connection between the whirlpool and the scream of terror. This makes me think, "Does the scream itself become the landscape?"

A limited palette of complementary colours, such as blues and oranges, are used for added vibrancy. A stark contrast, I believe is effective, as red suggests anger and heat, whereas blue suggests coldness and a blend oil paints and pastels create a

mixture of colours, like the mixed up emotions, thoughts and feelings of the skeletal figure. Anger and frustration is also suggested through the scraped on pastel lines as well as the very visible brushstrokes, making it seem as if Munch has executed this work at speed, through his need to release his pent-up emotions onto the canvas. It is as if this represents Munch's inability to communicate with people, even through a scream, but can perhaps express himself more successfully through his painting.

These two anonymous figures help suggest to me that this scream is internal, within the dark figure's mind since it looks as though they have possibly walked by him and carried on along the bridge. They both seem to be walking towards a light, away from Munch, ignoring him. Munch is stuck in the same solitary, isolated position, in the solemn darkness. Perhaps it is possible to assume the figures are the cause of this man's angst or madness as the lines of the bridge, which run from the screaming figure, lead directly towards them. The sea is stormy and threatening, which to me represents the mess of Munch's mind and possibly his stormy life. All these points, to me, emphasise the loneliness of the figure, and possibly the loneliness throughout his life.

The setting of this painting, in my opinion, increases the idea that the figure, or Munch, may have been driven to the point of madness, where committing suicide could be the answer to his messed up mind. The barriers of the bridge provide footholds and beyond lies deep, stormy water. To me the figure is insane, literally.

This picture is a caption, a moment 'frozen' in time. Although the screams cannot be heard they can be felt. These screams are within the figure's head, full of anxiety, depression, madness and insanity, as represented by the chaos of the sea.

The artist generates a threatening atmosphere when I observe the painting. This is due to the distortion of shapes and colours, gestural marks and waves of pastel and paint. The two anonymous figures as well as the skeletal figure of Munch, also contribute to this powerful atmosphere.

This painting to me is both abstract and representational of Edvard Munch's mind. In analysing this painting I think I have found out more about how one's mental thoughts can be represented through imagery. Although eerie, this painting is very compelling and one which I could look at time and time again.

'The Scream' Edvard Munch 1893.

‘EVENING ON KARL JOHAN’ EDVARD MUNCH (1892)

Primarily Karl Johan is a boulevard, in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, within which there is a palace at one end and a parliament at the other. In this painting it is the parliament building of the Stortinget that we can see situated in the middle distance.

When I look at this painting the perspective leads the eye towards the Stortinget, positioned on a horizontal axis. Here the curvaceous streaks of the sky lead me to the street where a few people enter. Our eyes flow over this and are redirected in a clockwise motion into the canvas along the vertical buildings on the left, used as a cut-off, and back to the dominant solid structure of the Stortinget. What the object in front of the Stortinget, to the right of the canvas, actually is, is unimportant as its foreboding shape is merely used as an auxiliary to lead our eye onto the solitary, almost silhouetted figure walking up the boulevard against the flow of pedestrians. It is possibly about to collapse on him.

This is a moment in time in which there is a complete silence, but there is activity. There is ‘hustle and bustle’, though any communication and interaction remains exempt.

The ‘in your face’ figures in the immediate foreground seem of a stereotypical middle class nature. Their clothes all seem identically smart and their faces are also all similarly transfixed and ghoulish, expressionlessly open-eyed with pinched cheeks. Cut off at the waist, these highly impersonal, anonymous figures are advancing, apart from three, apparently part of a never-ending line, and in an oppressive proximity, invading the viewer’s and Munch’s personal space. It is clear that Munch wants to display to us the feeling of intimidation possibly felt by him. The motion of these advancing figures can be described as robot-like, as if programmed.

The Stortinget is a seat of law and order, which both guards a community and is an authority. The windows of this building are lit up like eyes almost like a ‘Big Brother’ – to me it is possible to see that the community maybe being watched.

The people of the community are restricted by their middle class barriers. I would go as far as to say they were prisoners of middle class repressions and constraints, imposed by the Parliament. The colour of the windows, light yellow, is reflected in the faces of the anonymous group of people, thus the use of colour helps our eyes move around the canvas.

The standing silhouetted figure is stepping away from the crowd and his distance is emphasised due to the close proximity of all the other figures. The lonely figure is separated, and excluded. We are obliged to ask ourselves the question "Is this Munch himself?"

Munch is withdrawn, reinforcing the isolation of him at that moment in his life and possibly throughout his life. He perhaps sees the outside world as alien places populated by ghostly figures, out to get him. It is evident that Munch views a city as a metropolis that devours souls, almost like a centre of anxiety, which he is afraid to be part of. It is little wonder why this particular painting has been grouped in Munch's series, 'Fear of Life'.

The complementary colours of yellows and purples, blues and oranges are juxtaposed, adding vibrancy needed to attract and maintain the attention of anyone who catches the slightest glimpse. Highlights of red and purple on the right are also echoed in the sky. In general the colours used have a fair resemblance of his 1893 work 'The Scream'. Munch has used washes of colour with scumbled paint, where the dry brush of paint has been spread over the base of the wash. Impasto paint has been employed on three windows on the left and in the ones lit up in the Stortinget to produce a glowing effect.

This painting, to me, is both abstract and at the same time, representational of Munch's mind at this very obviously troubled time in his life.

Evening on Karl Johan' Edvard Munch 1892.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is particularly evident as to why both artworks are included in Munch's 'Fear of Life' series. As they were both painted within one year of each other, we can reflect on how this was a negative time in his life. There are striking similarities in each, besides the same palette of complementary colours. Isolation is conveyed through the lonely, anonymous figure in each and in the overall imagery in his paintings. Munch also manages to convey a certain anonymity in both paintings. Karl Johan is situated in a crowded city, whereas 'The Scream' is more landscape based through the anthropomorphic features of the sea. Despite this difference, both are equally lonely and both convey a solemn silence. Munch's skill is evident in his artwork, as I believe this was a way for him to convey his emotions and communicate, when in fact he could not do this with people. Due to studying 'The Scream' and 'Evening on Karl Johan', I have also discovered how one's thoughts can be interpreted and portrayed through a painting.

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