

*The Scream*: A Description and Interpretation  
(Non-fiction)

"Disease, insanity and death were the angels which attended *my* cradle, and since then have followed *me* throughout *my* life."

Norwegian artist Edvard Munch painted *The Scream* in 1893. It was during the time of the Industrial Revolution, when Western Europe was experiencing great social change in its urbanisation and industrialisation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Norway had become a highly religious country with the Protestant 'awakening' and was oppressive in its expectations of strict, puritanical behaviour. Born on the December 12<sup>th</sup> 1863 in Løten, Norway, he grew up in Oslo (formerly Kristiania) and was well educated in The School of Art and Design in Kristiania, where he studied art for two years. His father, Christian Munch, was a deeply religious military doctor. Edvard's mother died when he was five years old from tuberculosis. When he was fifteen, his eldest sister Sophie died of the same disease and Edvard himself was often ill. A younger sibling was also diagnosed with a mental illness at a young age. Because of these tragic influences, much of his art was related to illness, death and grief.

*The Scream's* central focus is a screaming figure, located in the middle of the foreground of the painting. The screaming figure's head reaches to almost the midpoint of the painting. He has a long, curvaceous body with minimal detail stretching from the centre of the bottom of the painting, topped by a skull-like head, shaped like an upside-down pear. The bald, rounded head with its vague, chilling eyes, crude nostrils and mouth contorted in a silent shriek. His long hands are clapped to the sides of his head in a perpetual state of despair. The sex of the screaming figure is uncertain but this is perhaps on purpose, as if it is to represent all of humankind rather than a single person.

This core-figure is standing on a wooden walkway, possibly a bridge or a pier, which runs from the bottom right of the painting in the foreground to the left middle ground, where it disappears from view. There is a railing visible on the right side of the walkway, travelling the length of the bridge, wide in the foreground and gets narrower as it shrinks into the distance. Unlike the remainder of the painting, the walkway is very defined and linear with a distinct solid look to it. This part of the painting is devoid of the emotion that is echoed in the rest of the painting. The walkway has an overall imposing air to it and an eerie dominance. From the pastel browns that streak the floor of the walkway, we can infer that the walkway is built out of wood. On the handrail, the vivid sky is reflected, giving the inside of the railing a dark, shadowy feel. I think it is significant to note that although we see the sky reflected by the handrail, no shadow is cast upon the walkway, as logic would dictate.

At the far end of the walkway are two tall, dark and rather ominous looking figures who appear to be approaching the figure. These figures on the left hand side of the painting in the middle ground are tall and quite indistinct. We can speculate that one is male and the other female from the top hat that the leftmost figure is wearing but essentially they are as much a mystery as the screaming figure. Both

characters lack facial detail but appear to be wearing long overcoats. The colours he uses to depict the all the people in the picture are dull browns and greys, perhaps signifying the darkness of life. We get the impression of a distant ghostliness because really the two figures raise more questions than they answer: Who are they? Where are they going? Are they walking towards or away from the screaming figure? Etcetera.

On the right hand-side of the painting is the background, which consists of a harsh orange sky dominating the top third of the painting with its fiery blend of blood reds, marigold oranges and pale peaches. Beneath the sky are rolling hills that seem to melt into a calm, murky inlet in front of the dark silhouette of the two mountains. There are possibly some boats and buildings in the top left of the middle ground. I think the effect of this half of the painting is like ripples of a puddle, slightly blurred and it draws your eye across the page. I think that the background of water and sky could represent the freedom of nature because of its way, fluid and generally dreamy appearance. The somewhat psychedelic and hypnotic way in which the background is painted also gives the impression that it is unreal or a dream. On the right hand side of the painting, the water meets land, complete with a yellow, sandy beach.

In general the brush strokes of the painting are broad and impressionistic, rough rather than detailed and accurate. Munch paid little attention to minor detail. The crudeness of the picture accentuates its horror and its intrigue.

The *Scream* is an immensely symbolic, impressionistic painting, abstract and ambiguous, giving rise to many interpretations. There are also some elements of realism built-in, all of which contribute to the aesthetic enigma that is *The Scream*. Different viewers have interpreted *The Scream* in different ways, according to how they answered the obvious and paramount question: Why is the central character screaming?

I believe that the central figure in the picture is representative of humanity and the reality of human life in society as one of struggle, suffering and loneliness. The figure cries out in pain at the reality of difficulty and strife in life and the constant fear of illness and death, always present to those who are alive. Instead of beauty, the joy of communion in human relationships and the peacefulness of pastoral and nature-scenes, positive aspects of life painted by many painters, including the French Impressionists before him, Munch is revealing negative aspects of life as he saw and experienced it.

My understanding of why the main figure is screaming is because he feels trapped and alienated by his society and its prohibitive laws. The figure is caught on the bridge and cannot reach the freedom of the wavy water, moving as it will, because the handrail of the walkway blocks him from the freedom of the sea. He can't move forward or he will fall off the page. He can't travel further along the walkway because he is hemmed in by the two ominous looking figures behind him. The figures' human nature is being obstructed; society is trying to model him into someone they want him to be, rather than who he is or wants to be. In the figure's cry of pain at the suffering of humanity and the restrictions and constraints of society, the painting could be asking whether life, if it entails such suffering, is worth living. It seems to be saying, if your spirit is dead, you might as well also be dead in

body. The content and setting of the painting give the suggestion that the figure could possibly be considering throwing himself off the bridge as his only escape. Subtle clues point me in this direction; his skull-shaped head, like death, the blood red sky and the gloomy figures, undertaker look-alikes.

There is a feeling of isolation in the painting. The central figure is painted in wavy strokes like the natural background and thus real and alive. But he is trapped on the bridge that has the straight lines of a still, solid inanimate man-made object. In my view, the walkway is symbolic of all that is manufactured and manmade.

The background totally contrasts the foreground in terms of style, but in meaning it is an extension of the ideas symbolised by the foreground. The distinct colours used in the sky are similar to those of a bonfire and an inferno, an image often associated with destruction. Possibly the destruction in the sky could be a forewarning about the breakdown of moral and family value that collapsed in the second half of the twentieth century. Alternatively, the wavy, non-conformist way in which the whole background was painted may indicate that the background represents nature, more specifically, human nature: Our freedom of choice, belief, expression and thought. From the way in which the main character is depicted I think it is obvious he belongs in nature but feels trapped by the pressure to conform to society's expectations and wants. Society as a force, represented here as the walkway, and its demands of what individuals should be is, like the bridge, inescapable. The fact that the walkway extends into the distance unto infinite is evidence of this.

I believe the ideas explored in the scream are still very relevant in today's post-modern world. From the minute we are born, we receive messages from the media, some blatant and some sublime, all telling us to be better, to look, do, or buy the same as everyone else.

Teenagers in particular are under pressure to conform to a pre-defined model by parents and possibly even grandparents, who want to see you excel in academic achievement, sports and social areas. The school pressures one to get 'good grades' and to obey the rules. The media: TV, films, magazines, Internet, newspapers is constantly showing images of ultra-slim women and men with washboard abs and tree-trunk arms. Peer pressure from friends and colleagues to do what they do, think the same as them and wear 'fashionable' clothing is constant. We are all crying out in a Munch-ian like scream, faced with pressures bombarding us from all directions; telling us to be the be-all and end-all.

At the start of the third millennium, youths are forced to divide and be categorised into specific social 'groups': grebs, townies, sk8rs, trendies, hippies etcetera. This isolation fragments the strong social binding that used to exist between youths of all ages. We are cut off from peers in different 'groups'; this is a step further that Munch's personal isolation from society. Now, we are isolated from everyone, crying out to the world to recognise that we are special, an individual; not a sheep. We want to express our views and have unanimous acknowledgment. I think a very relevant example of this is mobile phones. There are many ways to personalise your 'phone e.g. logos, ring tones, screensavers and fascias but to fit in you have to have the same phone as everybody else.

Whereas Munch's existential gloom and doom were a psychological affair, deeply rooted in his Mother's death and the hell-fire Christianity of his strict father, our anxiety is more public than personal: mounting concern over global warming, scares of STDs, fear of global terrorism and paranoia over paedophiles hacking their way into children's brains via the Internet. We, like Munch, are living amongst profound societal change and philosophical chaos when all the unsinkable certitudes that held together the nuclear family and our close, friendly communities seem to be slipping away.

Today there is a greater freedom of choice and behaviour with a less authoritarian society, but now less certainty and security of role, position and sense of belonging. Life may not be constrained by strict rules, but it is pressured by unwritten expectations. And, in spite of medical advances many people do still die young, less from plagues and disease but now from cancer due to pollution and chemicals in food, water and air. Technology has improved travel and communication but there is still conflict, strife and war, and instability in relationships.

In conclusion, Munch had extremely powerful paintings. The way that he expressed himself through his art is what gave him the best qualities as an artist. The pain that he had to deal with was terrible, but he put it to good use. Edvard Munch died on January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944 in Ekely, near Oslo. He was eighty years old and through his lifetime he had created 1,008 paintings, 15,391 prints, 4,443 drawings and watercolours, and six sculptures. In 1963, a museum was opened to showcase all of his great work. The museum, situated in Oslo is called The Munch-Museet.

"Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a flat. Choose a big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers...choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose a future. Choose life...But why would I want to do a thing like that?"

– Renton, Trainspotting