

Vincent van Gogh: The Impact of Events in His Early Life on His Artwork

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Abstract: In Winnicott's view, a *good-enough-mother* is one who adapts herself to her baby's needs near the end of her pregnancy and following the baby's birth, and can identify with him in his initial stage of absolute dependence. If the mother had previously lost a baby and was unable to mourn the loss, then the baby born after the lost infant has to struggle more to become himself as his mother is focused on the lost baby and cannot see the new one in his own right. This article examines the link between the painter Vincent van Gogh's creative activity and the influence of his earliest relational experiences on his work and paintings.

Keywords: pre- and perinatal psychology, stillbirth, Vincent van Gogh

What needs to happen at the beginning of life in order for a person to be equipped with the conditions that will enhance the personal experience that underlies a life of ever-increasing significance? One of Winnicott's (1965) famous statements is, "There is no such thing as an infant...when one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant" (p. 39). The mother is the first facilitating environment—the person responsible for providing the holding and equipping, and enabling the feeling of self-realization.

Winnicott (1971) wrote that from the moment of birth until death, there is no person without this reality. He added, only if this is a

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containing and facilitating reality, will the conditions be created for the unfolding of personal experience, which is the basis of life that is not only about survival, but infinite, constantly-created meaning.

In Winnicott's (1975) view, a good-enough-mother is one who adapts herself to her baby's needs near the end of her pregnancy and, following the baby's birth, can identify with him in his initial stage of absolute dependence. He referred to the mother's position in the earliest phase as "primary maternal preoccupation" (pp. 300-303). This describes a mother with heightened sensitivity, who is capable of devoting herself for a limited period to safeguarding her baby's ability to continue living. He goes on to describe how the mother allows herself to be created by the baby, and the baby is able to experience the illusion of creation that later will serve as a source for the existence of a constantly-creative life.

The mother gradually reduces her level of adaptation in accord with the infant's needs. Only when the baby begins to experience the mother as a separate object and not as part of his fantasy, can she then expose him gradually to the environment and to a level of frustration that he is able to bear. The baby can already wait a few minutes for food, because he is aware of what is happening around him and is familiar with the noises that indicate the food will soon appear. The waiting leads to the beginning of an awareness that the mother exists as a separate object from him, which marks the beginning of separateness. The path is that of almost absolute dependence at the beginning, which changes gradually to relative dependence on the way to independence.

In normal development, the child gradually becomes autonomous and acquires the ability to accept responsibility for himself independent of environmental support. The process begins with maternal care, followed by parental care, and continues to the extended family, which together provide the individual with the opportunity to journey further afield outside the family, and from there to educational frameworks and participation in various social groups. This is a widening circle that extends into culture and/or belief.

Failure on the mother's part in the early stage of the child's life includes reactions on her part to impingement by her baby. These reactions interrupt the infant's "going on being," as well as producing a "threat of annihilation," a very real primitive anxiety that includes death (Winnicott, 1975, pp. 303-305). If the mother had previously lost a baby and was unable to mourn the loss, then the baby born after the lost infant has to struggle more to become himself as his mother is focused on the lost baby and cannot see the new one in his own right. In such cases, various artists have to invent themselves at a later stage in their work in order to overcome the loss of an adaptive and loving mother. Only when the baby undergoes a good enough early holding experience will the world be

endowed with personal meaning, and only then will he live a creative life (Winnicott, 1975). This article examines the link between the painter Vincent van Gogh's creative activity and the influence of his earliest relation experiences on his work and paintings.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Who was Vincent? How did his early history influence his life and his art? Vincent signed his works and letters with his first name, Vincent, because he sought to put distance between himself and his family. "I myself am different in character from the other members of the family, and really I'm not a Van Gogh at all" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 26). Vincent signed his paintings as he signed his letters to his brother, Theo—with his first name. For this reason, only the name Vincent will be used in this paper, rather than van Gogh or Vincent van Gogh.

A Chronology (Walther & Metzger, 2006, pp. 702-720)

1853: Vincent van Gogh was born following the birth of a stillborn son of the same name on the same day on the previous year. He was the first of six children. His family lived at Zundert near Breda in Holland. His father Theodorus (1822—1885) and his mother Anna Cornelia nee Carpentus (1819–1907) married in 1851. Vincent's father had ten siblings who lived in various parts of the Netherlands.

1857: Birth of Theo, Vincent's brother. The two brothers were extremely close throughout their lives.

1861—1868: Vincent attends boarding schools.

1869–1870: Vincent's uncle obtained a position for him with the art dealers Goupil & Cie in The Hague. After completing his training, he was transferred to the Goupil's London branch. This was a happy time for him. Vincent's own career as an art dealer soon started. He joined the branch of Goupil & Cie in Paris and Brussels at the age of sixteen.

1871–1875: The family moved to Hevoirt. Vincent was transferred to the London branch of Goupil & Cie. He fell in love with Eugenie, who was already engaged, and he was extremely depressed and disappointed. The uncle arranged a transfer to Paris, but Vincent neglected his work.

1876 -1879: Vincent became an assistant teacher and his pay came in the form of board and lodging only. He was found to be unsuitable for the job of lay preacher and went to Amsterdam to prepare for the entrance examination to the theology faculty. He found the studies difficult, while at the same time his interest in painting was growing.

1880—1885: Vincent decided to become an artist and devoted his time to drawing. Theo began sending Vincent a share of his monthly salary until the end of his life. Vincent went to Brussels and stayed there a year. He

went to Etten to see Theo and draw landscapes, He fell in love with his cousin Cornelia, but she rejected him. This event led to a violent quarrel with his parents whom he came to visit at Christmas, and he left the parental home. Vincent met Clasina in Sien, an alcoholic prostitute who was pregnant; he lived with her for a while and she occasionally sat for him. He wanted to marry her, but the family and friends advised against it. He left Sien and remained lonely. His paintings show the local peasants hard at work. He stayed in Nuenen where his parents were living, and painted a lot. His father died of a stroke. Here Vincent painted the famous picture *The Potato Eaters*. At the end of 1885, he moved to Antwerp.

1886–1888: After rejecting the academic Ecole de Beaux-Art, Vincent moved to Paris and lived with Theo. He became a friend of the Parisian painters. His mother and sister moved from Nuenen to Breda; some of his paintings were sold to a junk dealer and others were burnt. He became friendly with Gauguin. He exhibited with some friends without success. Vincent then left Paris and moved to Arles where he painted *The Sunflowers*. He moved into the Yellow House in Arles. Gauguin came to Arles to be with Vincent. Their conflicting views led to quarrels and a deterioration in their relationship. Gauguin left the house in a hurry. Vincent then mutilated his left ear lobe and remained in a hospital recovering for a few days. This bitter quarrel with Gauguin was the first of Vincent's crises and hospitalizations. The two artists didn't meet again.

1889–1890: Vincent returned to the "Yellow House." Under pressure from the town people (they called him "The Redheaded Madman"), he was again hospitalized. Theo married Johanna Bonger. Vincent entered Saint-Paul Asylum. At the end of the year, he tried to poison himself by swallowing paint. An article was written praising his paintings for the first time. Theo's wife gave birth to a son christened Vincent Willem. His painting *The Red Vineyard* was purchased. This was the only painting Vincent ever sold. Vincent arrived in Paris looking fit and healthy. He had been working every day, interrupted only by his bouts of madness and now he paused for a while. He couldn't be inactive for long time. He traveled to Auvers-sur-Oise to Dr. Gachet. Vincent exhibited ten pictures. "Your paintings in the show are very successful," wrote his brother. Vincent was no longer a stranger to the art world. He was seen as one of the promising new talents.

July 27, 1890: Vincent fired a bullet into his chest and died, with Theo at his bedside. His last words were, "I wish it were all over now the sadness will last forever" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 692). He was buried in Auvers-sur-Oise cemetery.

January 25, 1891: Theo died and was buried alongside Vincent at Auvers-sur-Oise. Theo's widow remained dedicated to watch that Vincent's art was seen by the public.

The Painter, Vincent

From the vast material that has accumulated on Vincent's life and work, there is very little evidence of his relationship with his mother. My intention is to focus on the connection between events prior to and following Vincent's birth, the relationship with his mother and his brother Theo, his functioning as an artist, and his tragic death.

Vincent wrote:

Not only did I begin drawing relatively late in life, but it may also be that I shall not live for so very many to come ... I only take into account plans for periods of between five and ten years ... and that is how I see myself—as a man who must produce something with a heart and love in it, within a few years I must produce it by will power ... In a few years I must finish a certain body of work. (Walther & Metzger, 2006, pp. 95-97)

Vincent was an autodidact and completed the vast majority of his works over a ten-year period (Shoham, 2002). His paintings demonstrate his genius, creativity, imagination, and freedom of spirit, which were his legacy. His paintings were a vehicle for self-expression.

The Mother, Cornelia Anna Carpentus van Gogh (1819-1907)

The extensive literature on Vincent devotes very little attention to the mother's relationship to her first-born child and his stormy life. She lived a long life and died 17 years after Vincent's death. In all the difficult events of his life she was not present and did not give him support. It would seem she did not believe that his decision to become an artist was suitable for him. An incident that sheds light on her attitude to his works was that when she sold her home she burned some of his works and others she gave to a junk dealer.

Vincent, the mother's first live birth, as was mentioned above, was born following a stillborn son of the same name on the same day a year previously. In Winnicott's (1975) view, a baby born a year later to a mother who had previously lost a baby and was unable to mourn the loss, would have to struggle more to become himself because his mother was focused on the lost baby and could not see the newborn baby in its own right. In my view, Vincent tried to invent himself at a later stage with help of his art in order to overcome the lack of "holding" by a *good-enough mother*. What was missing could not be replaced, but remained a strong desire throughout his life and work. Vincent did, however, find a substitute for

his mother's care in his beloved brother Theo, who supported him unconditionally.

The Brother, Theo (1857 – 1891)

More than 800 letters were exchanged between Vincent and his brother, Theo, which provide an ongoing picture of Vincent's personality and his art. Four years younger than Vincent, Theo supported him emotionally and economically throughout Vincent's life until his death. It would seem that the close relationship with Theo was a substitute for the lack of closeness to his mother. Theo loved and appreciated Vincent, supported him financially, paid for his painting materials, and played the role of father, confessor, and sympathetic critic of his paintings until the end of Vincent's life.

Throughout his ten creative years, Vincent expressed the fear of being a heavy burden on his brother, even though he needed his support and was dependent on it. He expressed his difficulty of dependence in a large proportion of his letters. In one letter, he wrote, "...dear brother how strongly and intensely I feel the enormous debt I owe you for your faithful help" (Roskill, 2008, p. 187). He also wrote, "I have been afraid that I am causing you all anxiety because I am a burden on you, but ... plainly proves that you are aware that I, too, am distraught and as worried as yourself" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 692, L 649).

After Theo got married, Vincent wrote:

... you know now that I have started to hope once again. I am hoping that a family will be for you what nature is to me, the clods earth, the grass, the yellow wheat, the farmer—that is to say, that your love of human kind will not only bring you toil but also afford you comfort and necessary recovery. (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 607, L 604)

Theo had always been extremely close to his brother and was sensitive to his needs. In the following passage, after Vincent's death, Theo perceptively expresses what he considered to be Vincent's essence. He wrote, "I discovered a man of integrity as if two people dwelt within him. One of them marvelously talented, refined and tender, the other selfish and hard-hearted..." (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 692).

Vincent, the Person and the Painter

All of Vincent's various activities and occupations before he started to paint, whether as an art dealer or pastor to miners living in poverty, or

living like the peasants themselves, did not bring him satisfaction. Rather, they gave him the feeling of being in a false position. Having decided to become a painter, he initially drew laborers of all kinds: miners, peasants engaged in active pursuits, digging up potatoes, weavers at work, etc.

He was aware, however, of how his decision to paint affected his relationship with his family. He wrote, "I have become ... a kind of impossible and suspect personage, at least somebody whom they do not trust ... the most reasonable thing for me to do is to go away ... so I cease to exist for you all" (Roskill, 2008, p. 102, L 117). He added, "I consider myself a dangerous man, incapable of anything" (Roskill, 2008, p.103), and, "...most people who know me consider me a failure ... I feel it so vividly that it quite depresses me ... life is only a kind of sowing time, and the harvest is not here" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 92, L 184).

In his drawing he wished to create a world of his own and to grasp it in his work (Walther & Metzger, 2006). The following extracts from his letters to Theo reveal most profoundly Vincent's view of the significant role of art in his life. He wrote, "I am an artist ... always seeking without absolutely finding..." (Roskill, 2008, p. 111, L 148). A few other examples are:

"I can very well do without God both in my life and in my painting, but I cannot ... do without something which is greater than I, which is my life – the power to create" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 286, L 673).

"Art demands persistent work, work in spite of everything, and continuous observation" (Roskill, 2008, p. 151-155).

"...the duty of a painter to try to put an idea into his work" (Roskill, 2008, p. 178, L 288).

"I cannot paint so beautifully but abandon myself to it so totally that I let myself go without paying attention to any rule" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 398, L 539).

"When I receive the money my greatest appetite is not for food, though I have fasted, but the appetite for painting is stronger ... at once I hunt for models, and continue until all the money is gone" (Roskill, 2008, p. 253).

"... I do have a right and reason to paint ... It has cost me no more than a ruined body and a wrecked brain to live as I was able, to live as I had to, as a friend to all humanity" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 466, L 513).

"Work you have slaved over, work you have tried to put your character and feelings into, can give pleasure and sell" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 92, L 185).

"The sun itself cannot make the world bright without souls to feel it" (Roskill, 2008, p. 266, L 595).

The cypresses were Vincent's torches of the soul and in them the painter was expressing what he had called "the essence of the landscape"

(Roskill, 2008, p. 266, L 595). Because of his ultimate solitude he had to go through all the possible concepts that linked him to nature – a process that left him with partial answers or none at all, and feeling more desolate than ever (Walther & Metzger, 2006). He wrote, “...know no other way than to wrestle so long with nature that she tells me her secret” (Roskill, 2008, pp. 224-225, L 480).

In his letters, Vincent expressed a desire to merge with nature, to feel the landscape and the connection to the sun, the sky, and the universe. In addition to his tremendous talent as an artist, it is possible to sense, on the basis of his lifestyle and of his paintings, Vincent’s strong longing for containment and a sense of meaning that were lacking from the beginning of his life and maybe even before his birth.

Vincent struggled to maintain a sense of his own existence. Through his art he hoped to achieve a connection with nature and its mysteries, that nature would reveal its secrets to him, and enable him to find the thread that would bridge the primary feeling of existence that seemed to be so lacking in him, and his wonderful ability to create.

Did Vincent succeed to be the creator of a world—a world that already exists? He believed that the painter’s task is to praise the world, and nature, and in so doing to infuse it with life and being (Wright, 2009; Winnicott, 1971). He was painting the world into existence, and in so doing, giving it a dimension of life it lacked for him before. This desire, however, could never be fully achieved, leaving him restless and dissatisfied. Indeed he was never happy with what he had achieved, criticized himself most severely, and provided an ongoing commentary on himself as a painter. “...I do not care anymore what people say about me or about my work” (Roskill, 2008, p. 253, L 550).

Vincent also drew many self- portraits that seem to be exterior mirrors of his emotional loneliness. Possibly these portraits gave him the possibility to “exist and feel real” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 134), because at the beginning of his life he was unable to find himself in the mirror of his mother’s eyes. Vincent wrote “...I’ve always had the belief that through portraits one learns to reflect...a portrait is something almost useful and sometimes pleasant...” (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 332).

Towards the end, especially after Gauguin’s visit, he felt a depth of despair that led him to severely injure himself, the start of his mental deterioration. In his last painting, *Wheatfield With Crows*, the crows prevent escape from the bitter fate—the inevitable ending (Shoham, 2002).

After Vincent’s death, Dr. Gachet wrote, “He was an honest man and a great artist. For him, more than anything else there were only two things: humanity and art” (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 692).

Illness and Death

Gauguin's two-month sojourn in Arles was of central importance in Vincent's breakdown and death. For Gauguin, the concept of a unity of art and life, which for Vincent had been evolving perfectly naturally, had no validity. He behaved brusquely and arrogantly and with a feeling that Vincent had exiled him to a provincial, uninspiring region. For Vincent, the meeting with Gauguin was traumatic. Faced with the increasingly-apparent incompatibility of their approaches, Vincent became more and more unsure of the value of his own work and his identity. For Gauguin, the cost was far less significant; he would simply have to leave, writing off two wasted months. But for Vincent, it meant the destruction of a worldview. The utopia all his toil had meant to establish finally proved unattainable.

Gauguin left suddenly and set off for home. The two artists were never to meet again (Walther & Metzger, 2006). On the night before Christmas Eve, Vincent mutilated himself by cutting off his earlobe and giving the lobe to a prostitute. Vincent was hospitalized to stop the loss of blood caused by the wound. A month later, he had an attack of paranoia that led to repeated hospitalizations (Walther & Metzger, 2006).

During his last two months in Auvers-sur-Oise, Vincent was more cheerful and confident. During that time, he painted some eighty works. Again the artist demanded of himself all that could possibly be demanded of a human being. He was determined to create an enduring memorial before he vanished for all time from the face of the earth (Walther & Metzger, 2006).

Both Vincent's art and his life appear to have been guided by his strong fear of death. He wrote, "In the life of the painter, death may perhaps not be the most difficult thing... we take death to go to a star...while alive we cannot go to the star, any more than once dead we'd be able to take the train..." (Roskill, 2008, p. 272, L 641).

Hirschfeld (2018) wrote in reference to the painting *Skull of a Skeleton with Burning Cigarette*, that Vincent scratched death in his paintings. Like smoking, death is enjoyment; the death instinct is a pleasant and painful itch that needs to be scratched.

After the shock of mutilating his ear lobe, Vincent did not return to himself. In the periods of quiet when he was not hospitalized, he drew rapidly and with enthusiasm; during the periods of hospitalization, he experienced anxiety, despair, and loneliness.

The time between his mental breakdown and his suicide included periods during which his profound creativity was not affected. However, a combination of his inability to paint during the attacks, his wish not to place an additional burden on his brother for financial support, and his

fear that the buds of success that were beginning to sprout would exact a high price, all led to his suicide. After his death, Theo wrote to their mother, "He has found the peace he never found on earth... He was such brother to me" (Walther & Metzger, 2006, p. 694).

Discussion

Vincent the artist demonstrates the link between his early biography and his decision to be a painter. He was born after his brother's death. In his very early life, he was unable to find himself in his mother's eyes because she was probably mourning the lost baby and was occupied with the memory. As quoted above, "There is no such thing as an infant ... when one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant," (Winnicott, 1965, p. 39). A good-enough mother is one who adapts herself to her baby's needs and can identify with him in his initial stage of absolute dependence. This is a mother who is capable of devoting herself for a limited period to safeguarding her baby's ability to continue living (Winnicott, 1971).

Failure on the mother's part in the early stage of the child's life includes reactions on her part to impingement by her baby. These reactions interrupt the infant's "going on being," as well as producing a "threat of annihilation," a very real primitive anxiety that includes death (Winnicott, 1971, p.132).

Because Vincent lacked the crucial initial "holding," he looked for a "hug" in nature, an external mirror that would see him and nourish him with the possibility to "exist and feel real" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 134), which was a never-ending task. The artist therefore tried to create a new possibility of being, one that his mother was unable to provide him in his early childhood. In this respect, Vincent's paintings can be interpreted as an expression of the unresolved traumas he underwent very early in his life.

In one of my earlier articles (Lubetzky, 2015), I discussed three great artists who underwent a similar chain of events in their early childhood, and how this affected their creative endeavors throughout their lives. The present article adds an additional layer of understanding in relation to Vincent's artistic work. This article focuses on the significant connection between the events that occurred in the early years of Vincent's life, before and after his birth, particularly the relationship with his mother (parents), his close connection to his brother as a mother substitute, his functioning as an artist, his powerful longing to connect with nature and its mysteries, and finally the tragic and painful end to his life.

My hope is that the above will add a layer of familiarity with the artist, his way of working, and the loaded and rich life of a great artist—Vincent van Gogh.

This article is dedicated to the memory of my unique painter sister, Tova Meller.

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