

Research Article

Van Gogh, Anne Sexton, and the Mythological Narrative of Apollo and Artemis in
“The Starry Night”Sham Dara Abdulla¹ , Nergz Bakhtyar Kamal² ¹ Department of English Language, University College of Goizha, Sulaymaniyah, 46001, Iraq

*Corresponding Author: Nergz Bakhtyar Kamal, E-mail: nergz.kamal@uog.edu.iq

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	This study offers a close reading of “The Starry Night” that integrates both Anne Sexton’s poem (1962) and Vincent van Gogh’s painting (1889) as interrelated artistic creations. Traditionally, scholarly analyses of these works have centered on biographical and psychological perspectives, often emphasizing themes such as the depiction of suicide, which is frequently viewed as a central motif in both pieces. This study, however, aims to move beyond these conventional reviews by following a close reading to uncover the significations of each medium. By following the semiotic approach (Ferdinand de Saussure) and (Charles Sanders Peirce), this paper reveals deeper connections between Sexton’s verse and van Gogh’s visual art. The analysis will focus on the elements of both works and their depiction of Greek mythological narratives— the story of Apollo and Artemis. We will explore how the rhetoric of the poem and van Gogh’s brushstroke techniques evoke imagery associated with the island of Delos— the mythological location where Leto gave birth to the twin deities. Therefore, this study seeks to illuminate the symbolic and thematic interplay between the literary and visual aspects of “The Starry Night,” providing new insights into their interconnected meanings.
Received Mar 13, 2025	
Revised May 29, 2025	
Accepted May 31, 2025	
Keywords	
Anne Sexton	
Van Gogh	
Starry Night	
Semiotics	



Copyright: © 2025 Sham Dara Abdulla, and Nergz Bakhtyar Kamal. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.

1. Introduction

The American poet Anne Sexton first published "The Starry Night" in 1962 in the collection *All My Pretty Ones*. This poem draws inspiration from an artwork with the same title by Vincent Willem van Gogh. Structurally, Sexton's text is composed in free verse, which allows for a flexible and expressive form of writing without a fixed meter or rhyme scheme. It's presented by an unknown narrative voice that seems to shift among the visual elements in the painting. The poem is divided into three stanzas: the initial two stanzas each contain six lines and focus on various components depicted in Van Gogh's image. The third stanza, which has five lines, builds upon the ideas introduced in the previous lines, offering a broader reflection or deeper insight related to the themes explored earlier. While the verse does not follow a rigid

rhyme scheme or consistent metrical pattern, it incorporates numerous instances of both half-rhymes and full rhymes. This approach enhances the lyrical quality of the poem and contributes to its overall rhythm and flow despite its free verse form (Zelazko, 2022). Van Gogh's visual work (Figure 1) is an oil-on-canvas painting dominated by a night sky filled with swirling blue hues, a bright yellow crescent moon, and stars depicted as radiant spheres. The cypress tree, often likened to flames, stands tall in the left foreground, with its dark branches curving and swaying with the sky's movement, partially obscuring it. Amid this vibrant scene, a structured village lies in the lower right of the canvas. Straight, controlled lines form the small cottages and the slender church steeple, which stands out as a beacon against the rolling blue hills. The illuminated yellow windows of the houses evoke a sense of domestic warmth and tranquility, offering a visual anchor of calmness within the composition's otherwise dynamic and energetic atmosphere (Zelazko, 2024).



Figure 1. van Gogh's "The Starry Night" (1889)

Traditionally, scholars have examined both the text and the image biographically, particularly in terms of the psychological aspects of the poet and the artist. For instance, McSpadden (1984) thinks that the theme of the poem is connected to the painting where Sexton expresses a desire to be overtaken by the "old unseen serpent". In "Her Kind," she discovers a similar possession by a greater, cosmic identity within herself as a woman. This longing for a larger connection, which in "The Starry Night" can only be realized through death which is echoed in both poems (p. 78). In other words, her poetic contemplation of Van Gogh's painting of the same title reveals a less Christian perspective compared to her other works. In this

verse, the prime mover of the universe is the "old unseen serpent"— an allegorical figure. Moreover, McSpadden thinks Sexton's poem is significant since it highlights two fundamental aspects of the poet's worldview: her belief in nature and art as superior avenues of redemption over religion. The use of Van Gogh's painting as the central metaphor of the text indicates that she sees him as an artistic predecessor who shares these views. This connection becomes explicit in the poem's epigraph, suggesting that she considers herself an extension of the artist (p. 123). Besides McSpadden, McCann (2023) claims that "The Starry Night" reflects the poet's connection with another tormented and suicidal artist, van Gogh. The short, free-verse poem opens with an epigraph from one of the painter's letters to his brother, where he wrote: "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."¹ McCann states that Sexton often began her poems with epigraphs from various works, which are crucial as they highlight a central theme of the poem that might otherwise be missed. In this poem, she indicates that she shares not only the artist's mental instability, self-destructive tendencies, and artistic nature but also his unfulfilled longing for spiritual sentiments. Then McCann sheds light on Van Gogh's biographical aspect of the painting, saying that when the artist wrote the letter to his brother, he was painting the masterpiece "Starry Night Over the Rhone," which is depicted in the poem. The painting portrays the night sky in blues and blacks, with a swirl of violent orange representing the moon and burning yellow-white stars. Contrary to the tranquil scene suggested by the title, the painting is intensely unsettling.

The movement appears as a great rush skyward, with the sleeping town beneath the sky unaware of this spiraling of all nature toward infinity. Sexton interprets this painting as a reflection of her death wish. The dark tree at the edge of the painting is described as "black-haired"—Sexton was a brunette—and it "slips / up like a drowned woman into the hot sky". To clarify her meaning, she adds, "This is how / I want to die". Greene (2024) thinks that Sexton's poem serves as an example – it reflects on the iconic painting of the same name by van Gogh, using it to explore her fixation with death. In other instances, this ekphrastic verse can provide interpretations of the symbolic elements present in the artworks they depict (Greene 2024). Richardson et al (2017) focus on the painter's context while he painted "The Starry Night" saying that he remained secluded in his room at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France, following a severe mental breakdown. Despite his increasingly fragmented grasp on reality and

¹ Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, September 29, 1888, in *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters*, accessed July 4, 2024, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let682/letter.html>.

rationality, exacerbated by substance use, his hands retained the skill to apply paint to canvas, capturing his innermost emotions and visions. His artworks, characterized by vibrant colors and swirling dynamic lines, stand as a testament to his profound artistic achievements, even amidst his escalating delusions, illusions, and hallucinations. Besides these, Caldarone (2010) sheds light on the presence of two cypress trees in van Gogh's work, stating that it could be interpreted not just as symbols representing him, but potentially as a reflection of dual personalities within himself. This raises questions about whether the depiction of two trees, one larger than the other, suggests a subconscious representation of conflicting identities or states of mind. During his time in Paris, van Gogh's consumption of absinthe may have played a significant role in triggering an underlying illness that manifested later on (p. 6). Thomson (2008) claims that "The Starry Night," painted in June 1889, marked a period of significant complexity in van Gogh's life. He resided at the asylum of Saint-Remy in the South of France, completely separated from his homeland, family, and fellow artists. His isolation was compounded by his fragile and unpredictable psychological state. Despite these challenging circumstances, van Gogh remained steadfast in his commitment to realize his artistic potential, a path he had pursued since 1880.

It's essential to state that our investigation of the selected works will be different from these interpretations. This essay aims to enrich the literature by broadening the possibility of reading such works from different perspectives – decentering or decoding the language – to do so, we will follow the semiotic approach as a theoretical framework of this study.

2. The Frames of Analysis

Through a close reading, this study aims to explore the hidden premises of both works. Our focus is not on the historical and biographical references but on the essence of the language and the artistic elements. To do so, our approach to analyze both van Gogh's and Sexton's works will be semiotics. The concept of "semiotics" or "semiology" was introduced by the renowned linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Saussure provides an in-depth exploration of language as a complex "sign system". This system comprises two primary components: the signifiers, which include words, sounds, or images, and the signified, which are the mental concepts or meanings associated with these signifiers (Saussure, 2011). Saussure further elaborates on the nature of language by asserting that it is heavily influenced by arbitrary social conventions (Fatah & Ahmed, 2023). These conventions, shaped by cultural traditions and social norms, play a crucial role in determining the meanings behind the words we read or hear and

the images we encounter. Essentially, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not natural or inherent but is established through social agreements within a given culture (Ahmed et al., 2023). This perspective highlights that the meanings we attribute to language are not fixed but constructed through social interaction and cultural context. By emphasizing the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs, Saussure challenges the notion that there is a direct and inherent connection between words and their meanings, suggesting instead that language is a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon (2011, p. 67).

Charles Sanders Peirce expands on the theory of semiotics by proposing that a sign involves a “representamen” and a “mental interpretant,” which he describes as a ‘triple relation’ encompassing the sign, the concept, and the real object. He categorizes signs into three types: icon, index, and symbol. According to Peirce, an icon is a direct or apparent representation of its referent, such as photographs depicting objects through physical likeness. An index, or seme, is a sign that indicates the presence of its referent in a non-arbitrary way, such as smoke signaling the presence of fire. Peirce later notes that “icons and indices assert nothing” on their own. In contrast, a symbol is an arbitrary representation of its referent, exemplified by words, which have no inherent connection to the actual objects they denote (1994). Additionally, Roland Barthes’s semiotic analysis of visual arts suggests that artworks convey both literal and symbolic meanings. In his famous essay “The New Citroen” from *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes draws a comparison between motor cars and Gothic cathedrals, illustrating how artistic value can be attributed to objects created by unknown artists (1972, pp. 88-89).

3. The Birth of Apollo and Artemis in “The Starry Night”

Above all else, the titles of both Sexton's poem and van Gogh's painting —“The Starry Night”—evoke a sense of irony. Conventionally, nighttime is associated with darkness; however, the language here presents the image of a vivid, star-filled sky. Primarily, the adjective 'starry' proposes a visual evocation. In other words, despite the darkness of the night, there is a luminous nocturnal view:

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh, starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

The opening line introduces readers to the "town," presenting an image of a settlement larger than a village yet smaller than a city, characterized by its tranquil atmosphere, adorned with numerous houses. That is to say, the text highlights a residential life setting. However, this place "does not exist". In other words, the surreal scene appears to suggest multiple significations: it could be an unreal location, a setting that is not present anymore, or it signifies the obscurity of the nighttime. On metaphorical levels, it also proposes the depiction of town dwellers who are dead, vanished, inactive, or asleep. Semiotically, if we take a close look at the painting, it depicts a landscape during the nighttime, the town "that does not exist". Iconically (by resemblance), the image of the houses shows a place where people are living. However, this also could be read symbolically; in other words, these could either be unoccupied or signify graves within the town. This concept is further refined by the illumination scene through the windows, suggesting the presence of a light, such as a candle, within the houses. These lights, in turn, reflect the starlight. The poetic portrayal, "black-haired tree slips up like a drowned woman," connotes the tree that looks like a woman's flooded, dark hair. This image seems to be the focal point in van Gogh's work; despite the silence of the town, this tree seems to be alive and symmetrical. Moreover, the blue sky appears like a sea. In other words, this representation shows the way that the tree slips are drowned in the dark sky, similar to an image of a woman.

In addition, the terms 'into the hot sky' manifest the heat of the stars and the sun, then comes, "the night boils with eleven stars". The term "boils" shows the sense of heat that is related to the stars, conjures the atmosphere of that night that simmers due to the heat from the twinkling lights, and eleven stars dominate the night. Traditionally, this has been read with biblical references, where the eleven stars are viewed as an allusion to Joseph, referencing Genesis 37:9. It has been said that van Gogh aspired to achieve acceptance from his peers as an artist, akin to how Joseph eventually gained recognition after enduring a difficult life.² However, in this study, the words are unraveled to see other aspects as well. In other words, through unfolding the language, one could realize that "eleven stars" do not necessarily refer to historical or religious backgrounds, but, in this context, they seem to signify the Greek myth. In classical antiquity, the twelve Olympians were regarded as the principal gods of the Greek pantheon. Strikingly, nighttime is usually characterized by coldness and obscurity; however, at this point, it seems to be heated with the

² Vincent van Gogh Studio, "Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh," accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.vangoghstudio.com/starry-night-by-vincent-van-gogh/#:~:text=But%20one%20meaning%20that%20Starry,did%20after%20a%20hard%20life.>

brightness of the celestial bodies, which signifies fire, or it could also be a substitute for the sun, which appears to show the potency of the gods. According to Greek mythology, Artemis, the moon deity, is represented by the crescent moon, which also symbolizes strength and signifies fecundity and rebirth. As an analogy to the poem, both Apollo and Artemis are compared to the sun and moon, which is also depicted in the painting – the bright side of the image is shown through their light, illuminating night and turning it into daylight. The language reveals itself as a known narrative voice – “I” – who wants to die: “Oh starry night! This is how/I want to die”. This unknown speaker shows the image of death that is flying among the stars, as it continues:

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

The speaker depicts the night scene with the evocations: “[i]t moves. They are all alive,” this appears to show something that is moving and makes the sky and the stars alive, which seems to be connected to the painting, as the air moves, it gives breath to the other elements in the view – and they are all moving. The subject matter of the artwork is deeply intertwined with Greek mythology — the birth of Apollo and Artemis, the former is known as the god of the sun and the latter is the goddess of the moon — the children of Zeus and Leto. The setting presented in both mediums shows the portrayal of the island of Delos, where Leto gave birth first to Artemis and, nine days later, to her twin brother Apollo. All the gods, except for the envious Hera, were present for Apollo's birth beneath a palm tree on the island, which had been floating until Leto arrived. Leto, frequently associated with the wilderness and symbolically linked to wolves, imparted these attributes to her daughter Artemis. In the current context, it seems essential to give an overview of the narrative: Zeus, captivated by Leto's beauty, engaged in an affair with her, which was soon discovered by his wife, Hera. Enraged, Hera cursed Leto, declaring that she would never find a place on land to give birth to her children. This curse compelled Leto to embark on a quest until she discovered refuge on the floating island of Delos, where she ultimately gave birth to Apollo and Artemis. The significance of the scenes related to Leto and the twin gods seems to be evoked in poem through its imagery and symbolism.

For instance, the expressions "even the moon bulges in its orange irons" literally suggest a sense of anxiety and fear, while metaphorically, it indicates the radiant power and warmth of the sun, which implicitly depicts the emergence of Apollo. The phrase "to push children, like a god, from its eye" figuratively represents the images of the children shielding their eyes from the overpowering sun, likening its intensity to the divine authority, which also signifies the narrative of both Apollo and Artemis. Further in the poem, the expressions "the old unseen serpent swallows up the stars," describe celestial waves resembling an ancient serpent slithering among the stars, possibly alluding to Python, the dragon Apollo defeated in myth. This imagery ties back to the central mythological motif of Apollo's triumph over Python and the establishment of his dominance over prophecy and light. The refrain that concludes the second stanza emphasizes these themes, with subtle variations that reflect the evolution of the narrative and its symbolic resonance within the poem. The third stanza progressively develops the theme from the final line. Thus, the punctuation—colon – appears to be read metaphorically, symbolizing the moon and the sun and the duality between these two celestial bodies:

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.

Subsequently, the narrative voice concludes with the expression: "into that rushing beast of the night". At this point, the speaker wants to be carried by the wind of the night to fly among the stars, which is described as a beast. The wind is called a beast due to its strength on that night. Eventually, "sucked up by that great dragon, to split/from my life with no flag". This also evokes Hera and Leto's conflict, in which Leto had no place, but magically she could find the island. Apollo was nourished with nectar during his infancy, which allowed him to mature into a fully-fledged god within a single day. This rapid growth underscored his divine heritage and prepared him for the challenges he would face as an adult. One of these challenges occurred soon after his birth when Apollo confronted Python, a monstrous serpent sent by Hera to pursue Leto and her children. At the sacred site of Delphi, Apollo engaged in a fierce battle with Python and emerged victorious, using his mystical arrows to slay the serpent. This victory not only established Apollo's status as a powerful deity but also solidified Delphi as a center of prophecy and oracular wisdom.

under his patronage.³ On the one hand, this is depicted in van Gogh's visual work, through the brushstrokes, the curving lines seem like the serpent moving through the setting, which figuratively represents Python's shape. In addition to the curving lines, the dark areas symbolize Python's hiding in the background, which reflects its actions.

In the poem, the speaker identifies with Apollo's mythological struggle against Python, expressing a profound longing to be consumed by the dragon. This desire for annihilation suggests a yearning for obliteration, where no remnants of their existence or identity would remain—a theme echoing the mythical conflict between Apollo and Python, where the defeat of the serpent symbolized the triumph of light over darkness, order over chaos. Throughout Sexton's verse, references to mythical creatures such as beasts, dragons, and serpents endowed with human-like attributes serve to underscore its deep-rooted connection to Greek mythology. The poignant phrase "no belly, / no cry" at the poem's conclusion resonates with the profound implications of Apollo's victory. This concept is portrayed in the visual work, as the dark color of the tree is contrasted with the brightness of the sky with its moon, sun, and stars. The analogy between the verse and the painting is depicted through the terms: "into that rushing beast of the night/ sucked up by that great dragon," which shows the power of the wind "rushing the beast" – the tree – that signifies the serpent attacking the gods. In another part of the painting, we see the cloud with a white color, which symbolizes innocence, safety, and purity. Between the earth and the heavens, clouds formed, symbolizing the heavenly sphere. Rainfall from clouds helps the entire globe. One of the key components in classic Chinese art is the cloud, because numerous gods and immortals have used clouds as a means of transportation; clouds are also symbolic of heavenly movement. Deities are linked with scrolling clouds, which foretell their approach. Dragons are said to be able to blow clouds into existence, such as Python in the story of the birth of Apollo. Storm clouds and life-giving rain are both associated with dragons.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we examined "The Starry Night" as a textual work by Anne Sexton and a visual art piece by van Gogh. While previous analyses have focused on personal history, mental issues, and emotions, our approach shifted to exploring the essence of these mediums. Consequently, we set aside the historical

³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Leto." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 4, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leto>

context of their creation and instead unraveled the language to puzzle out the meanings through semiotic analysis. Our interpretation revealed an analogy between the themes in these works and the Greek myth related to the birth of Apollo and Artemis. The setting – the island of Delos – mirrors the setting where Leto gave birth to the twin gods. Metaphors emerge through the integration of the sign system and brushstrokes, inviting the audience to visualize the conflict between Apollo and Python. By moving beyond religious, historical, or biographical interpretations, this paper contributed to the literature by exploring themes related to mythological power.

Funding: The authors declare that no funding was received for this research.

Declaration of Competing Interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing of interest.

References

- Ahmed, A. B., Fatah, S. N., & Ahmed, A. A. (2023). From brushstrokes to pixels: Analyzing the evolution of political propaganda in visual media. *Journal of Philology and Educational Sciences*, 2(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.53898/jpes2023215>
- Britannica. (2024, June 13). *Delos*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Delos>
- Cairdeall. (2022, January 25). *Ekphrastic poetry: The Starry Night by Anne Sexton*. Retrieved August 11, 2024, from <https://cairdeall.com/2022/01/25/ekphrastic-poetry-the-starry-night-by-anne-sexton/>
- Caldarone, J. (2010). *The cypress trees in "The Starry Night": A symbolic self-portrait of Vincent Van Gogh*. Art & Art History Student Scholarship. https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/art_students/3
- Dombrowski, J. (n.d.). *Delos: Birthplace of Artemis and Apollo*. Luxe Adventure Traveler. Retrieved from <https://luxeadventuretraveler.com/delos-birthplace-artemis-apollo/>
- EBSCOhost. (2024). *Starry Night*. Retrieved August 11, 2024, from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.neu.edu.tr/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=119626790&site=eds-live>
- Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, April 4). *Leto*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leto>
- Fatah, S. N., & Ahmed, A. B. (2023). Representation of gender binarism in Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Stalin*. *Journal of Philology and Educational Sciences*, 2(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.53898/jpes2023211>
- Greene, J. (2024). *Ekphrasis in poetry*. Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.neu.edu.tr/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=174044474&site=eds-live>
- McCann, J. (2023). *The Starry Night by Anne Sexton*. In Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.neu.edu.tr/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=119626790&site=eds-live>
- McSpadden, K. F. (1984). *The self in the poetry of Anne Sexton*. Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University Chicago. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2327
- Peirce, C. S. (1994). *Collected writings* (Vol. 8, C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks, Eds.). Indiana University Press.
- Poemotopia. (2024, August 11). *The Starry Night by Anne Sexton*. Poemotopia, from <https://poemotopia.com/anne-sexton/the-starry-night/>
- Richardson, B. A., Rusyniak, A. M., Rusyniak, W. G., & Rodning, C. B. (2017). Neuroanatomical interpretation of the painting *Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh. *Neurosurgery*, 81(3), 389-396. <https://doi.org/10.1093/neuros/nyx406>
- Saussure, F. de. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press.

Thomson, R. (2008). *Vincent Van Gogh: The Starry Night*. The Museum of Modern Art.

Van Gogh Studio. (2024, August 1). *Starry Night by Vincent van Gogh*. Retrieved August 1, 2024, from <https://www.vangoghstudio.com/starry-night-by-vincent-van-gogh/#:~:text=But%20one%20meaning%20that%20Starry,did%20after%20a%20hard%20life>

Van Gogh, V. (2024). *Vincent van Gogh: The letters*. Van Gogh Studio. <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let682/letter.html>

Zelazko, A. (2023, March 15). *The Starry Night painting by Vincent Van Gogh*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Leto>