The Starry Night

SUMMARY

Looking on a nighttime landscape, the speaker sees that the town below has vanished, except for a single tree falling up into the sky that looks like a drowning woman sinking into water. Everything is quiet, and eleven hot stars burn overhead. The speaker calls out to this starlit night and declares that this is the way they want to die.

The whole landscape, to this speaker, seems to move, and everything in it seems alive. The moon swells, looking as if it were barely held back by orange chains, and seems to birth children from its staring eye, as if it were an old god. An ancient, invisible snake seems to devour the stars. And once again, the speaker calls out to the starlit night, and says that this is the way they want to die.

The speaker wants to be devoured by the huge, swift, dragon of the night, leaving their life behind, surrendering their identity, their desires, and finally their voice.

THEMES

THE RELEASE OF DEATH

The speaker of "The Starry Night" gazes into Vincent Van Gogh's famous painting of a brilliant night sky and longs to "die" and dissolve into it—or, more precisely, to be *devoured* by it, as if it were a "great dragon." This kind of death might sound frightening, but to this speaker, being eaten up by the starry night would be a deep relief: an end to all the pains of life and an escape from the day-to-day burden of being a lonely, suffering person. This poem suggests that beauty (like the beauty of the night sky) can make people long for a spiritual experience that will release them from pain—and that such longing for transcendence can also be a death wish.

To this speaker, Van Gogh's "The Starry Night" is so lovely that it seems overwhelming, and even dangerous. Where many spiritual seekers have looked to the sky and seen a peaceful heaven, to this speaker the night's beauty is a sea one can "drown" in or a "great dragon" that might devour anyone watching. In other words, the painted sky's beauty is so intense that it's dangerous, threatening to swallow the speaker right up.

But that thought doesn't disturb the speaker at all. On the contrary, they repeat that "this is how / [they] want to die." To this speaker, being devoured by the dangerous beauty of this starry night would be a relief, allowing them to leave behind their "flag," their "belly," and their "cry"—metaphors that might suggest identity, beliefs, appetites, and suffering (among other possibilities). Devoured by the "rushing beast" of the sky, they'd get to leave behind all the pain and complexity of life and become part of the bigger "alive[ness]" of the universe.

The speaker's longing to be eaten up by this dangerous sky suggests, not just that they feel deeply moved by this artwork, but that they relate to the famously suicidal Van Gogh, sharing both his passionate vision of the world and his longing for death. A desire to lose oneself in the beauty of the world, this poem suggests, can go hand in hand with a longing to lose oneself in death: to a suffering person, death can look overwhelmingly lovely.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

THE POWER OF ART

On one level, "The Starry Night" is a poem about feeling lonely and longing for death. But the poem's very existence also gestures to the power of art to make people feel *less* alone. The awestruck speaker of this poem, who longs to "die" by being devoured by the night sky, might be Vincent Van Gogh himself, creating his famous painting "The Starry Night." But the speaker might equally be a later viewer *admiring* "The Starry Night," feeling what Van Gogh felt. By blurring the boundaries between the painter and the art-lover, the poem suggests that art has the power to communicate intense emotional and spiritual experiences. Sharing those experiences seems to allow the speaker to slip out of their individual self and feel like they're a part of something bigger.

The poem never makes it clear whether it's spoken in Van Gogh's own voice, or in another speaker's voice as they look at Van Gogh's painting. That ambiguity suggests that a powerful experience of beauty, recorded in art, can cross not only the boundaries of time and space, but the boundaries that separate one person from another. Whether the speaker is painting "The Starry Night" or merely looking at "The Starry Night," they feel just the same things. By allowing people to communicate their experiences, the poem suggests, art also allows people to feel profoundly connected. (And the poem's reader is implicitly invited to be part of this chain of inspiration and empathy, too!)

That point only feels clearer considering that the poem's speaker longs to dissolve into the universe, giving up their individual identity to be part of the beauty of the starry night. Desiring nothing more than to "split / from [their] life" and be eaten up by the "rushing beast" of the night sky, the speaker suggests that there's a deep pleasure in leaving the individual

self behind to become part of something bigger (though, of course, it's also possible that the speaker shares Van Gogh's literal suicidal feelings). Art, the poem suggests, can help to temper loneliness and pain, reminding people that they're never as alone as they might think.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

That does not ...
... to his brother

"The Starry Night" begins with an epigraph: a quotation from one of the painter Vincent Van Gogh's many letters to his beloved brother Theo. In it, Van Gogh says that when he feels himself "having a terrible need of [...] religion," he "go[es] out at night to paint the stars."

That line will feel significant to anyone familiar with perhaps the most famous of Van Gogh's works, a painting called—you guessed it—"The Starry Night." This picture, a swirling night landscape lit by blazing stars, clearly inspired this poem. And the quotation from Van Gogh's letters right up top suggests that Van Gogh's *life* inspired this poem, too.

In other words, this poem will respond both to Van Gogh's beloved painting and to the feelings that Van Gogh recorded in both his visual art and his writings. Many of those feelings were painful ones: Van Gogh suffered from severe mental illness and often felt deeply alone. Searching for "religion" in the beauty of nature and art was one way he tried to find meaning, connection, and consolation.

The very existence of this poem, in turn, might suggest that art really can help people to connect: to share powerful experiences, to feel less alone. Though Van Gogh himself never lived to see how famous and beloved his paintings would become, his artwork has survived for generations, touching countless later viewers—including fellow artists like Anne Sexton.

All this is important to a reading of this poem because of the ambiguous identity of its speaker. There's more than one possibility here:

- The speaker could be Van Gogh himself, immersed in painting a real-life starry night, and longing for freedom from his pain.
- Or the speaker could be a later art-lover, looking at Van Gogh's painting and feeling what Van Gogh felt.

There's no way to say for sure which of these interpretations is right—and that's exactly the point. That uncertainty suggests that art allows powerful experiences to cross the boundaries between one person and another, helping people to feel connected. That connection adds an important undercurrent of "religion" to this poem's portrait of an isolated speaker who longs to die.

LINES 1-4

The town does ...
... with eleven stars.

The poem proper begins with an eerie declaration: "The town does not exist." Knowing that this poem was inspired by Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," readers can imagine exactly the town the speaker has in mind. In Van Gogh's painting, a cluster of houses appears in a low corner, dwarfed by a wild cypress tree and a huge starry sky.

This poem's speaker seems to share Van Gogh's perspective on that tiny, far-off village. That village's life—its people, its bustle—are so far away they feel completely unreal and utterly "silent."

What really captures the speaker's attention is that big cypress, the "one black-haired tree" in the landscape—a tree in which the speaker seems to see their own state of mind:

> [...] one black-haired tree slips
> up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.

The speaker's simile suggests that they feel unhinged, and maybe suicidal. The speaker feels so disoriented that up has become down: the tree seems to be sinking into the sky as if the sky were the ocean. And the tree reminds the speaker of nothing so much as a dead body with ghostly black hair streaming out behind it as it sinks.

On the one hand, this is just a vivid bit of imagery, a fresh, surprising description of that sinuous cypress tree. On the other hand, the speaker's interpretation of a tree as a "drowned woman" suggests that the speaker sees isolation and death in this wild landscape, as if they were seeing their own unhappiness reflected back at them in a mirror.

But the speaker experiences that unhappiness in an unusual way. Rather than interpreting the night as brooding and gloomy (as Edgar Allen Poe might, for instance), they seem to see it crackling with energy. Above them, the stars don't glitter or twinkle: they "boil." That metaphor suggests that, to this speaker, this "starry night" seems full of enticing, menacing power. The speaker doesn't feel glum or grim as they look at the stars and think of death: they seem to positively *long* for the danger they see in this landscape.

There's something complex going on in the setting here. The speaker is obviously describing exactly the scenery of Van

Gogh's painting. But they treat that scenery as if it were real and right in front of them. In this moment, the border between art and real life—and between the speaker and Van Gogh—feels pretty blurry.

LINES 5-6

Oh starry starry ...
... want to die.

Overwhelmed by the strange, dangerous beauty of the night, the speaker calls out to it in an apostrophe that will become the poem's refrain:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

This cry might seem rather mysterious at first. It's hard to say exactly what the speaker means when they say that "this is how" they "want to die." Perhaps, the reader might guess, the speaker means that they'd love to pass away right here on the spot, gazing at this lovely (if rather menacing) landscape—or that they want to die feeling just the way they feel now, lonely and exhilarated.

In fact, it will turn out that the speaker means something even more strange and specific—something related to that image of the drowned woman "slip[ping]" easily into the night. But for the time being, all the reader knows is that this passionate speaker has both beauty and death on their mind, as if they might be about to keel over from the sheer gorgeous power of the starry sky.

Take a look at the enjambment in these lines:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

Spilling over the line break, this enjambed sentence gives the poem an energetic push, reflecting the speaker's excitement.

This is another moment that suggests this speaker either feels very close to Van Gogh, or that they *are* Van Gogh—who famously died by suicide at the age of 37. And these lines also might take readers back to the poem's epigraph, in which Van Gogh described seeking "religion" through his nighttime expeditions to "paint the stars." Perhaps part of this speaker's suicidality is a spiritual impulse, a feeling of profound longing to escape into a bigger, brighter universe.

LINES 7-10

It moves. They ...
... up the stars.

Looking back to the landscape, the speaker now sees, not death, but wild "alive[ness]." Everything in the sky "moves" and "bulges" until the night feels like a living creature.

Again, this is an image that will feel just plain accurate to readers who have seen some of Van Gogh's work, with its wild, swirling brushstrokes. But it's also a meaningful picture of constant churning change and growth and birth. This is an exhilarating-but-painful kind of fertility. In this landscape:

> Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
> to push children, like a god, from its eye.

Here, the speaker sees the moon as an ancient, powerful, suffering force. It's bound to the sky with "orange irons," rusty chains, and it's giving birth through its "eye"—"like a god," the speaker says, in a striking simile that might make readers think of the defeated, imprisoned Titans of Greek mythology.

Like the first stanza's vision of the cypress tree as a drowned woman, this image of a chained-but-fertile moon perhaps reflects the speaker's own experience. Giving birth through an "eye," after all, is a lot like what a painter or a poet does when they use art to give shape to their vision of the world. Once again, the speaker seems to be relating to this landscape, seeing their own suffering and their own creativity in it. Like the moon, the speaker feels at once trapped and powerful, helpless and fertile.

Listen to the way the speaker uses assonance to subtly underline their connection with the moon:

> It moves. They are all alive.
> Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
> to push children, like a god, from its eye.

Here, an /oo/ sound links "moves" to "moon," stressing the sky's churning energy. But even more significantly, a long /i/ sound threads all through this passage. In fact, that sound turns up over and over all through the poem.

This /i/ sound draws attention to some of the poem's most powerful words—"night," "alive," "sky." And it also keeps bringing readers back to a subtle, subconscious pun on the words "eye" and "I." Perhaps this speaker, more than most, feels as if their "I" and their "eye" are closely connected to each other: that their passionate, dramatic, animated way of seeing the world has a lot to do with their identity.

But this speaker, with their exact, energetic "eye," also wants nothing more than to give up their "I"—in other words, to "die." And this stanza's last metaphor (and its snaky sibilance) begins to hint that death might not be too far away:

> The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.

The speaker is still in a charged-up, fantastical world here: that "old unseen serpent" (vividly evoked with hissing /s/ and /z/ sounds) suggests any number of ancient creation myths about huge world-devouring snakes. The moon might be giving birth

endlessly, but this old "serpent" is a primeval force of death, devouring all those "boil[ing]" stars. The speaker seems to know it well: it's "old," it's been around for a long time.

"Unseen," invisible, this serpent doesn't seem to describe anything in Van Gogh's painting (except maybe his serpentine brushstrokes). Perhaps, then, it's not something the speaker sees, but something they feel: some deadly inner force. This giant, godlike snake—a force of death in a landscape full of tortured-but-beautiful life—might embody the speaker's suicidal longings.

That idea will come into focus in the poem's final lines.

LINES 11-17

Oh starry starry ...
... no cry.

At the end of the second stanza, the speaker returns to their refrain—with a subtle difference:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to **die:**

The first time these words appeared, they ended with a firm-but-mysterious period, inviting readers to wonder what kind of death the speaker had in mind. Now, a colon suggests that the speaker is about to explain *exactly* how they "want to die."

The answer has something to do with the "old unseen serpent" of the second stanza, which returns here in two subtly different metaphorical forms: it becomes the "rushing beast of the night" and "that great dragon." And the speaker wants this vast, ancient, reptilian monster to devour them.

In fact, they want the dragonish night to annihilate them so completely that they can:

> [...] split
> from my life with **no flag,**
> **no belly,**
> **no cry.**

This last series of mysterious, multivalent metaphors suggests everything the speaker longs to leave behind:

- The "flag" might suggest the speaker's separate identity—the way a country's flag marks it out as distinct from other countries. Or it might suggest a sense of purpose or belief, like a banner to rally behind.
- The "belly" could suggest hunger and need—all the day-to-day struggles of having a body. Or it could be a baby bump, subtly suggesting the pressures of motherhood or fertility.
- The "cry" could be the speaker's voice, the very one they've used in this poem. But it could also be a cry of pain—a pain that the speaker wants to end forever.

In other words, the speaker doesn't just want to die peacefully in front of a beautiful landscape. They want that landscape to eat them up, to make them part of its wild, dangerous, pulsing energy. Being devoured this way, the speaker imagines, would be freeing: it would release the speaker from all the pains and pressures of life.

This image of total annihilation might take readers back to the earlier simile of the cypress tree as a "drowned woman" easily "slip[ping] up" into the heavens. To die and become part of the night, in this speaker's eyes, would be a relief—perhaps a relief from being a frustrated, tormented *creator*, like the chained moon in the second stanza. (The speaker's desire to leave behind a "belly" hints that they might find the pressures of fertile creativity too much to bear!)

The poem ends essentially where it began. The speaker stands gazing at the starry night, longing to die and become part of it—but nothing more happens. They're still alone except for that "old unseen serpent," the death-wish they carry with them.

But these closing lines might also remind readers that, in some sense, the speaker isn't all alone with their pain, passion, and longing for death. The fact that Van Gogh painted "The Starry Night" means that Anne Sexton could *write* "The Starry Night." Even if creativity can feel painful and lonely, and even if a passionate vision of the world sometimes goes hand in hand with suffering, the very existence of this poem suggests that art can also help even the loneliest people to feel connected and understood—and perhaps to find some beauty in their sorrows.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help readers to feel the speaker's intense response to the starry night.

All of the poem's metaphors suggest wild, vibrant, and often dangerous energy. To this speaker, the night doesn't sparkle or twinkle or glitter: it "boils with eleven stars," so "hot" it could burn. And the moon becomes something like a Titan, an old "god" chained to the sky with "orange irons" and writhing as it gives birth to endless "children" (perhaps those boiling stars themselves) through its staring "eye." In other words, there's nothing comfortable, peaceful, or consoling about this sky.

That becomes even clearer when the speaker starts to imagine the night as an "old unseen serpent," a "rushing beast," and a "great dragon": all images of powerful ancient creatures that might "swallow up" not just the stars, but the watching speaker.

All of these metaphors suggest that the speaker experiences this starry night as menacing, exciting, and very much alive. But

they also hint that the speaker is seeing their own turbulent mind *reflected* in the night sky. The "old unseen serpent" that "swallows up the stars," for instance, might well be the same "serpent" that makes the speaker long to "die" in the first place: an embodiment of this speaker's strangely exuberant death wish.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The night boils with eleven stars. "
- **Line 8:** "the moon bulges in its orange irons "
- **Line 10:** "The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars. "
- **Line 13:** "that rushing beast of the night, "
- **Line 14:** "sucked up by that great dragon,"
- **Lines 15-17:** "no flag, / no belly, / no cry."

SIMILE

The poem's two similes work much like its metaphors, evoking the speaker's experience of this wild and starry night—and suggesting that the speaker sees more than a little of themselves in that night's energy.

In the first stanza, the speaker uses a simile that turns the world upside down:

> except where one black-haired tree slips
> up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.

Readers who know Van Gogh's painting can picture this tree clearly: it's a dark, sinuous cypress rising up in the foreground, and indeed might suggest a woman's flowing black hair. Here, though, the speaker imagines it *sinking* into the sky like a drowned woman—an image that suggests the speaker's disoriented, out-of-control perspective. Up becomes down, down becomes up: this speaker clearly has no solid ground beneath them anymore.

This simile also hints that this speaker is seeing their own reflection in this landscape. In the larger context of the poem, this "drowned woman" might well make readers think of the speaker, who longs to "die" by dissolving into the starry night.

Later on, the speaker imagines the moon chained to the heavens and "push[ing] children, like a god, from its eye." This surreal image again shows that the speaker sees this starry landscape as a strange, powerful, beautiful, and rather brutal place: birthing children through its "eye," this moon seems to belong to a raw, ancient world of myth, a place of pain and endless regeneration, where anything can happen.

The image of giving birth through an "eye" might also suggest an experience familiar both to a poet and a painter: giving birth to some new life—like this very poem!—through one's eyes, one's way of seeing the world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "one black-haired tree slips / up like a drowned woman into the hot sky."
- **Line 9:** "to push children, like a god, from its eye."

REPETITION

The atmospheric repetitions in "The Starry Night" help the reader to feel the speaker's isolation and their dazzled awe at the sight of the night sky.

The first hint that the speaker is having a pretty singular (and lonely) experience comes in the first stanza, when the speaker observes that:

> The town does not exist
> [...]
> The town is silent. [...]

The anaphora here draws attention to a peculiar phenomenon: all the attention the speaker pays to the "town" only makes the town seem more and more unreal and distant. By returning to this "silent" town at the beginnings of two lines, the speaker emphasizes just how alienated and lonely they feel. Of course, the speaker can see the town, but it hardly seems to matter: it's so remote and quiet that it doesn't seem to have anything to do with them.

The speaker seems to feel much closer to the "stars" than the town:

> [...] The night boils with eleven stars.
> Oh starry starry night!

This insistent polyptoton and epizeuxis evoke the sheer intensity of all those countless stars: one "starry" wouldn't be enough! It's as if the speaker is so dazzled they can only repeat the same words, marveling.

These repetitions help to give the reader a feeling for the speaker's isolation—and their passionate response to beauty.

There's one more important flavor of repetition here: the refrain that ends the first and second stanzas. See the entry on Refrain for more about that.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The town"
- **Line 4:** "The town," "stars"
- **Line 5:** "starry starry"
- **Line 10:** "stars"
- **Line 11:** "starry starry"

REFRAIN

The poem's refrain helps to give the poem its complex tone: in a repeated chorus, the speaker embraces beauty and death in the same moment.

The poem's first and second stanzas end with exactly the same words:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

The first time these words come around, they feel more impressionistic than literal. There's a sense that the speaker somehow wants their death to be related to the silence and blazing energy of this starry night sky, but exactly what that means is anyone's guess. Readers might imagine that the speaker wants to die looking at Van Gogh's painting, or that (more mysteriously) they want their death to *feel* like this night sky.

When this refrain rolls around again, something is a tiny bit different:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to **die:**

Here, these repeated words end with a colon, heralding an announcement: the speaker is about to tell readers precisely how they "want to die." The answer is even more violent and strange than one might have guessed. The speaker actually wants to be annihilated *by* the sky, to disappear completely into it and become nothing.

This refrain is thus meaningful, helping readers to understand this speaker's exuberant death wish. But it's also musical. Refrains most often turn up in songs, and this harmonious repetition suggests that the speaker isn't just grimly longing for death: they're also swept up in the night's beauty.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Oh starry starry night! This is how / I want to die:"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's many enjambments help to evoke the speaker's hypnotic fascination with the starry night and to create meaningful moments of surprise.

For example, take a look at the enjambment in lines 2-3:

> [...] one black-haired tree **slips**
> **up** like a drowned woman [...]

The enjambment here means these lines "slip" into each other just like the metaphorical "drowned woman" they describe slips into the oceanic sky. (The consonance in "slips / up" makes that effect even stronger.) This sense of continuity makes the speaker seem deeply absorbed in the landscape. And perhaps the enjambment even encourages readers to draw the word "slips" out a little, evoking a gradual surrender.

Meanwhile, down in lines 14-15, enjambment creates a more startling effect:

> [...] to **split**
> **from** my life with no flag,

Here, the enjambment mirrors what's going on in the lines: as the speaker imagines "split[ting]" from their life, the line splits in eerie imitation.

There's a similar tricky effect at work in one of the poem's most important enjambments, in lines 5-6:

> [...] This is **how**
> **I** want to die.

This enjambment (which appears again when this refrain returns in lines 11-12) leaves a few important words standing alone: "I want to die." These words form the end of the previous sentence, but they also work as a complete sentence on their own, leaving the not-very-secret message of the speaker's suicidality hanging in space.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "slips / up"
- **Lines 5-6:** "how / I"
- **Lines 8-9:** "irons / to"
- **Lines 11-12:** "how / I"
- **Lines 14-15:** "split / from"

ASYNDETON

This poem ends on a meaningful moment of asyndeton, in which the speaker finally explains exactly how they "want to die." The speaker longs:

> [...] to split
> from my life with **no flag,**
> **no belly,**
> **no cry.**

The lack of conjunctions here puts these striking metaphors all on a level with each other. The speaker seems to be making a calm, measured list of all the things they'd willingly give up in order to be "sucked up" into the night and dissolve for good: they'd happily relinquish a "flag" (perhaps a sense of identity or

purpose), a "belly" (perhaps appetite, need, or even a pregnancy bump), and a "cry" (perhaps a voice—or a cry of pain).

If the speaker had introduced a conjunction here—for instance, closing with "and no cry" rather than just "no cry"—the effect would have been pretty different. That final striking "cry" would have landed more softly, losing a lot of its conclusive punch. As it stands, the last line feels quietly powerful and leaves readers thinking about the "cry" the speaker is making even now: a poetic cry of longing and desperation. Asyndeton thus allows the final lines to land with dignified weight.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-17:** "no flag, / no belly, / no cry."

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "The Starry Night" weaves the poem tightly together, evoking the speaker's fascination and longing.

One flavor of assonance in particular studs this poem: the long /i/ sound. Here's just one example, from lines 4-6:

> The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

All those long /i/ sounds make this passage feel focused and musical. The speaker wants only one thing—to "die" and dissolve into this beautiful night—and the insistent return to one vowel sound captures their singleminded intensity.

Readers might also observe that this /i/ sound connects some of the poem's most important words: "night," "die," and (of course) "I." That assonance draws extra attention to those words, and also suggests the ways they're connected: gazing at this night, the speaker longs to die and give up their "I," their separate self, to become part of the sky.

Other flavors of assonance also help the starry night to feel as seamless and overwhelming to the reader as to the speaker. For instance, take a look at this subtle moment in the first lines:

> The town does not exist
> except where one black-haired tree slips

The short /ih/ sound here helps these lines to feel connected: one line "slips" into the next like the tree slipping into the sky.

And something similar happens toward the end of the poem, when the speaker imagines being "sucked up" by the "great dragon" of the night. Those identical /uh/ sounds reflect just what the speaker wants: to become an indistinguishable part of the sky, no longer a separate, suffering person.

Assonance thus subtly evokes the speaker's state of mind all through the poem, musically expressing their feelings.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "exist"
- **Line 2:** "slips"
- **Line 3:** "sky"
- **Line 4:** "silent," "night"
- **Line 5:** "night"
- **Line 6:** "I," "die"
- **Line 7:** "alive"
- **Line 8:** "irons"
- **Line 9:** "like," "eye"
- **Line 12:** "I," "die"
- **Line 13:** "night"
- **Line 14:** "sucked up"
- **Line 15:** "life"
- **Line 17:** "cry"

SIBILANCE

Sibilance helps to give this poem a note of menace.

The speaker often sees the night as a kind of monstrous snake: a "serpent" or a "dragon." It's only fitting, then, that the poem should sometimes hiss:

> The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
> Oh starry starry night! This is how

The combination of pure /s/ sounds and sharp /z/ sounds here evokes the snaky slither and hiss of that "unseen serpent." Those sounds feel edgy and dangerous, and suggest that the speaker longs to "die" in earnest: this reptilian night means business.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "unseen serpent swallows," "stars"
- **Line 13:** "rushing beast"
- **Line 14:** "sucked," "split"

IMAGERY

The imagery in "The Starry Night" helps to bring this poem—and the painting it describes—to brilliant life in the reader's mind.

This poem is ekphrastic, meaning it responds to an artwork in a different medium. In this case, that's Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," a painting so ubiquitous that Anne Sexton could just about count on her readers having seen it. The imagery here at once evokes the wild, swirling energy of that painting and records a specific speaker's response to it.

For example, when the speaker describes "one black-haired tree" rising into the night sky, readers will likely know just the tree the speaker means: the famous cypress that dominates the foreground of the painting. Imagining this tree as "black-

haired," the speaker helps readers to envision that cypress's undulating brushstrokes—but also to imagine it as a person, a "drowned woman" who reflects the speaker's own suicidal urges.

Something similar happens when the speaker describes the moon "bulg[ing] in its orange irons." The moon in Van Gogh's painting *does* look dynamic and full of movement, surrounded by rushing yellow-orange dashes of paint. But it takes the speaker's idiosyncratic perspective to imagine that moon as struggling against chains—another moment in which the speaker's own inner turmoil seems to color their interpretation of the landscape. The speaker, longing for a liberating death, sees even the moon striving for freedom.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "one black-haired tree slips / up like a drowned woman into the hot sky. / The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars. "
- **Lines 8-9:** "Even the moon bulges in its orange irons / to push children, like a god, from its eye."

VOCABULARY

Irons (Line 8) - Chains—used here metaphorically to suggest that the moon seems to be chained to its place in the sky.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Starry Night" is an ekphrastic poem: it describes and responds to a work of visual art. It uses turbulent free verse to reflect both the wild, rushing brushstrokes of Van Gogh's painting and the speaker's own inner turmoil.

The poem is built from three short stanzas, and the first two take roughly the same shape. They're both six lines long and move from shorter to longer lines and back again, so the poem looks like cresting waves on the page—a shape that echoes the whirling colors in Van Gogh's "The Starry Night." They also both return to the same desperate refrain:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

But the final stanza does something a little different. It's briefer—only five lines long—and each of its lines is shorter than the last, until the speaker finally imagines "split[ting]":

> from my life with no flag,
> no belly,
> no cry.

That tapering-off mirrors the speaker's desire to "die," to vanish into this starry night.

METER

"The Starry Night" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a regular meter. That said, its meaningful rhythms reflect the speaker's fascination and longing.

For instance, take a look at the changing line lengths in the poem's refrain:

> Oh starry starry night! This is how
> I want to die.

The movement from a longer line and a drawn-out cry—"Oh starry starry night!"—to the one-two punch of "I want to die" reflects the speaker's complex feelings: the dangerous, frightening, exciting beauty of the night makes them long for swift annihilation.

RHYME SCHEME

While there's no straightforward rhyme scheme in "The Starry Night," the poem intermittently uses plenty of rhyme and slant rhyme to evoke the speaker's longing to disappear into the stars.

The rhymes and assonance in the poem's second stanza are a good example:

> [...] alive.
> [...] irons
> [...] like a god, from its eye.
> [...]
> [...] night! This is how
> [...] die:

There's one full rhyme here, between "eye" and "die." But that one rhyme is accompanied by a whole host of long /i/ sounds weaving all through this stanza. That long /i/ appears again and again in every stanza, a focused sound that evokes the speaker's transfixed gaze.

The repeated long /i/ sounds in this poem might also make readers think of both "eyes" and an "I": both relevant ideas here! As the speaker's hungry "eyes" eat up the night landscape, they long to escape their "I," their identity, and disappear into the starry sky.

SPEAKER

When the poem begins with a quotation from one of Vincent Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo, it sets up a couple of possibilities about this speaker:

- On the one hand, the speaker could be Van Gogh

himself, "go[ing] out at night to paint the stars" and looking out at the landscape that will inspire his most famous painting.
- On the other hand, the speaker could be a later art-lover *looking* at that painting.

That ambiguity helps the poem to suggest that art allows people to share emotions and experiences. Even if the speaker isn't Van Gogh, they seem to be feeling the same complicated feeling the beauty-loving but troubled Van Gogh must have felt: a kind of elated death wish, a full-body embrace of the world that leads to a desire for annihilation.

This speaker, then, is a passionate and unhappy soul, and one who sees the world with an uncommon intensity. They might be Van Gogh, the similarly troubled Anne Sexton herself, or just an art-lover who shares those qualities with both the painter and the poet.

SETTING

The setting of "The Starry Night" is both vivid and a little ambiguous. On the one hand, the speaker might be Van Gogh himself, and the setting the real-life starry night he's about to immortalize in his famous painting. On the other hand, the setting might be the *painting*: the speaker could be a later viewer standing in front of Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," fascinated by its vision of the world.

Either way, this setting is awe-inspiring and dangerous. Everything the speaker can see, from the trees to the moon, seems to pulse, move, and boil, bursting with life. And that life is more than a little menacing: the speaker imagines the sky as a devouring "serpent" or a "dragon," ready to snap the unwary onlooker up in its jaws. If it did, no one would know: the nearby "town," the only sign of human life, is "silent," and seems so remote that it might as well "not exist."

This is a wild, magical landscape—one in which the speaker is both completely alone and surrounded by menacing energies. But the speaker doesn't mind any of that one bit. The speaker isn't afraid that this "starry starry night" will swallow them up: they *long* to be devoured.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) first published "The Starry Night" in her 1962 collection *All My Pretty Ones*. Like many of Sexton's poems, "The Starry Night" deals with Sexton's own struggles: she often wrote about her feelings of alienation and her difficulties with her mental health.

The intimacy of much of her work means that Sexton often gets lumped in with the Confessional poets: writers like Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sexton's own friend and mentor W.D. Snodgrass. These poets wrote unapologetically personal and soul-baring poetry, aiming to break the taboos of the uptight 1950s. But while Sexton's poetry is deeply confessional, she never saw confession as her primary artistic purpose. She felt that her great skill was her imagery; while her poems often reflected on her own troubled life, they're also notable for their vividly painted (and often fantastical) characters and landscapes.

Sexton was an acclaimed and important poet even during her lifetime (a reward that few poets enjoy!). She won a 1967 Pulitzer Prize for her book *Live or Die*, and collected many other honors and acclaims. She remains one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century and is often cited as an inspiration to second-wave feminist writers and thinkers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In writing an ekphrastic poem in response to Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," Anne Sexton clearly had not just Van Gogh's art, but his mental illness in mind.

Many modern psychologists suspect that Van Gogh suffered from what we'd now call bipolar disorder—a condition that Anne Sexton was herself diagnosed with. Van Gogh was famously tormented and moody, and he spent a lot of time in and out of mental hospitals. He even became good friends with one of his doctors and immortalized him in a famous painting. Tragically, Van Gogh died by suicide in 1890 at the age of only 37, never knowing that he would become one of the world's most beloved painters.

Anne Sexton might well have related to Van Gogh's sad story: her own mental illness was a central feature of her life from the time she was a child. She was repeatedly institutionalized, and wrote about her suffering in collections like *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, which takes its title from the name of an ancient and infamous mental hospital in London. And like Van Gogh, she died by suicide.

In choosing to write about Van Gogh and his art, then, Sexton reached out to a fellow sufferer, seeking a connection with another brilliant, unhappy, lonely artist.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Van Gogh's Starry Night — Learn more about the famous painting that inspired this poem. (https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/vincent-van-gogh-the-starry-night-1889/)
- A Short Biography — Learn more about Anne Sexton's life and work at the Poetry Foundation.

(https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-sexton)

- An Interview with Sexton — Watch Sexton speak in a 1973 interview. (https://youtu.be/IiOQkR7yTWM)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to Anne Sexton reading this poem aloud. (https://youtu.be/NY7eKFgieY8)
- Sexton's Legacy — Read about some recently rediscovered Sexton poems, and learn more about her influence on the world of poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/28/early-anne-sexton-works-rediscovered-after-60-years)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ANNE SEXTON POEMS

- Her Kind

HOW TO CITE

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