



The Art of Madness: Cosmic Chaos in the Works of Vincent van Gogh and Robert E. Howard

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Abstract

The painter Vincent van Gogh and the writer Robert E. Howard worked in different genres, but both produced rather bizarre works which have distinct similarities. In both, their work reveals the artist's belief that humanity exists among an overwhelming cosmic chaos which bids to engulf humanity. This cosmic animosity exists primarily in planes of existence other than the earth, but the forces of chaos and evil are hostile to humanity and are intent on engulfing the earth and destroying a humanity which is effectively helpless in the face of the onslaught. Both van Gogh and Howard died by suicide reflecting their unwillingness to live among the chaos.

Keywords: Chaos, Van Gogh, Robert E. Howard, Conan, Suicide, Starry Night

Vincent van Gogh was a famous painter and Robert E. Howard was a writer, best known as the creator of Conan the Barbarian. While Van Gogh and Howard worked in quite different genres, they were very much alike in some important ways. Both were great artists who produced some of the best works in their genre, both had limited success during their lifetimes, with their works gaining much greater renown after their deaths, and both died by suicide. Their suicides are clear indications of mental instability but several of their works also reveal their inner turmoil and growing psychoses. These paintings and stories which reflect their creators' mental oddities are frequently seen as among the artists' best works, but they also reveal the growing fear and pessimism in the artists' mind. There are some significant similarities in this mental disturbance which the two men exhibit in their work.

In particular, the paintings *Starry Night*, *Wheat Field with Crows*, and *Wheatfield with Cypresses* and the stories "The Frost Giant's Daughter," and "People of the Black Circle" all show a serious level of conflict, discord, contradiction, and tension between some normal human scene and the turbulence, tumult, chaos, and even violence in the celestial realm above or on some other level of existence (Louinet, 2005, pp. 372-375.) These conflicting elements in these paintings and stories show that, in the minds of Howard and Van Gogh, humanity exists amidst cosmic chaos, violence, and terror which threatens to break into the human world at any time.



Starry Night, painted in June 1889, has a clear discrepancy between the peaceful scene of a small village in the countryside which is preparing for a day's productive labour, with lights in the windows holding back the darkness, surrounded by peaceful, fertile farmland. This bucolic scene is greatly contradicted by the sky above in which stars appear in much greater size than normal and have a forbidding and even threatening aspect, and unusual turbulent movements of the very material of the sky swirls in agitation around the stars. This violence, menace, and chaos is cosmic in scope and potentially could totally overwhelm the human lives, structures, and institutions of the tiny earthly village below.

Two objects seem to be trying to bridge the gap between peaceful earth and chaotic sky. The church reaches up with its steeple as if reaching for Heaven and divine presence, but it barely reaches above the hills in the background and it is dark with no lights showing, signifying failure to overcome the chaos. The cypress tree presents a very different aspect, seeming to writhe in keeping with the turbulent, violent sky above and seems to be more akin to the celestial chaos than it is like the calm, resting village. The tumultuous, writhing tree seems to be a conduit for the celestial violence to make its way to the world below and the earthly tree is a participant in the

celestial chaos. Tellingly, it dwarfs the church and overshadows the church's attempt to overcome the chaos, emphasizing the failure of the darkened sanctuary.

Wheatfield with Cypresses, painted in July 1889, presents a similar conflict between the human artefact of a productive Wheatfield and the violent, swirling turmoil in the sky above. In this daytime scene, it is the clouds which writhe in seeming agony and chaos, in shapes very similar to those in the sky of *Starry Night*. Again, we see a cypress tree connecting the earth and the sky, but in this painting, the chaos of the unruly sky has invaded the earthly wheat field which is being blown about in the winds which roil the clouds and sky. This chaos of the wheat is more than mere symbolism, since the ripe wheat is being damaged by the winds and much of the precious ripe grain will be lost due to the shaking of the wheat in the strong winds. The violence of the turbulent chaotic heavens has come to Earth and is damaging humanity whose agricultural field is powerless in the face of such malevolence and power.



In *Cornfield with Crows*, painted in July 1890, the chaos and violence has completely overwhelmed the entire scene and nothing is calm or peaceful. The sky has become completely chaotic with no order or structure. The wheat is disordered, and the broad, gross brush strokes obscure the theoretical bounty of the field. The road seems to wander aimlessly and even the crows take on a threatening, possibly even diabolical air.

In this painting, chaos and violence are no longer limited to the sky. The terrible disorder has descended to the earth and has overcome any semblance of peace, calm, and goodness.

We can see a chronological progression in these paintings of a growing conviction by Van Gogh that the cosmic violence, chaos, and malevolence is gaining an increasing foothold on the earth and humanity. The peaceful village is unaffected by the violent sky, while the first *Wheatfield* has been invaded and damaged by the cosmic chaos, and the third and last has been thoroughly infused by the forces of disorder and violence and is in the process of being destroyed.

It is probably significant the third painting, *Wheatfield with Crows*, was painted in the month that van Gogh ended his own life.

A very similar concept of humanity beset by violent and hostile cosmic forces can be seen in the writings of Robert E Howard, the creator of Conan, Kull, and other heroic characters. Two of Howard's Conan stories clearly show such an idea. "People of the Black Circle" and "The Frost Giant's Daughter" manifest this idea (First Published in *Fantasy Fan*, March 1934. Also published as: *The Frost Giant's Daughter*, *The Frost King's Daughter*; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Gods_of_the_North.)

Like the three paintings of van Gogh, these stories are considered among Howard's best work.

"The Frost Giant's Daughter" is thoroughly pessimistic in that "normal" human life is warfare, a conflict between humans in which all but one die. The cruel ice divinities in the story, not satisfied with battle deaths in the conflict which those deities instigated, lure Conan, the only survivor of the battle, to his death as a sacrifice to the even more cruel father of the snow gods. Humanity seems to be helpless in the grip of its own warfare and the even greater cosmic malevolence of the gods of cold, hate, and violence. Of course, the great hero Conan defeats even the gods with his strength, courage, and a good sword, but the temptress goddess gets away to continue her depredations on humans. Conan's victory is only partial and temporary. The forces of chaos remain powerful, malevolent, and nearby.

"People of the Black Circle" also offers a clear dichotomy between regular human life and hostile forces which exist on another level (First published in *Weird Tales*, September, October and November 1934; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_People_of_the_Black_Circle.) The tribes of the hill people and the neighbouring Vendhyans are normal humans but who live under the shadow of wicked sorcerers who dabble in evil arts and demonic beings that are uncontrollable, violent, and which enable the sorcerers to possess terrible malignant power (Chalker & Ownings, 1998, p. 322. These evil powers cause the death of the king of Vendhya, and instigate wars between various human groups, resulting in much upheaval and suffering. But in Howard's

world, unlike *Starry Night*, there is no peaceful humanity. Warlike humans are all too willing to participate in the wars which the wizards precipitate. Howard sees humanity as all too heavily infused with the chaos and tumult of the cosmic diabolical order. His view of the conflict is that the earth has already become a part of the disorder, violence, and chaos, much like van Gogh's view in *Wheatfield with Crows*.

Conan is partially victorious against the snow gods and the wizards, killing some of both groups. Still, in both stories, one of the cosmic powers escapes and the greater power in the father of the snow gods and the demons is still waiting for more victims (Bleiler, 1983, p. 259). Victory by humanity and even the great hero Conan is only incomplete and transitory.

In "People of the Black Circle," the apprentice sorcerer Khemsa attempts to bridge the gap between the best of human life and the cosmic evil powers. This seems similar to the church and cypress trees in van Gogh's works (Lieber, 1968, p. 143). Khemsa wants the great power which aligning with evil will give him. So, he joins with the wizards in order to gain that ability but is unwilling to give up his humanity in the form of his love for the girl Gitara, not even to gain the capabilities he desires. The conflict destroys him and, unable to resolve the tension, he and the woman he loves die at the hands of his former masters. The evil power of chaos and hatred overcomes even love. Khemsa is very similar to both van Gogh and Howard, neither of whom could cope with life amid the perception of the outer chaos and the threat of that malevolent disorder overcoming humanity. Khemsa was unable to continue to live in the intersection of cosmic chaos and humanity; Howard and van Gogh were unwilling to live there.

These works reveal their creators' deeply pessimistic view of human existence (Finn, 2006, pp. 30-32). Both van Gogh and Howard seem to have believed that humanity was about to be overwhelmed by evil cosmic forces which were implacably hostile to the inhabitants of our world. As a result, both made the decision to leave this life.

A deeply dim view of the human condition is deeply infused in the works treated here. Howard and van Gogh both saw cosmic chaos and violence overwhelming a helpless humanity which was unable to hold back the coming destruction. Even Conan could only win temporary, local victories which would ultimately prove futile. Both van Gogh and Howard ended their own lives in what was probably an attempt to escape the approaching chaos which they saw as inevitable. The works which most clearly show this are some of their best.

Howard's despair about humanity is clear in "Beyond the Black River." (First published in *Weird Tales* 1935; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Beyond_the_Black_River) In that story, one character makes the observation about the barbarian Conan and warfare:

*"Barbarism is the natural state of mankind. Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance.
And barbarism must always ultimately triumph."*

Works Citation

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