

# The Intersection of Art and Medicine: A Critical Analysis on Edward Munch's *The Sick Child*

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## Abstract

Paintings convey complex emotions and narratives through visual elements such as colour, composition, and symbolism and provide a platform for marginalized voices. This study analyses the painting through the lens of medical humanities, examining how Munch's work reflects and challenges the medical discourse of ancient times. *The Sick Child* serves as a reflective tool interlinking art history and medical discourse, offering an exploration of human suffering and illness while simultaneously bridging the gap between artistic representation and medical knowledge. This study critically analyses how Munch's painting highlights the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of illness and care giving. *The Sick Child* is an emotionally charged confession of Munch's personal trauma and illness that links both autobiographical revelation and artistic expression. *The Sick Child* as an art contributes to a poignant illness narrative that captures the emotional intensity of suffering and pain. The observer has used a qualitative approach to offer a complete overview on modern solutions and benefits in medical humanities. The study explores the literary elements, symbolic representations, and medical aspects, serving as a multidisciplinary approach in enhancing the value of empathetic and aesthetic approach to medicine and literature.

**Keywords:** Medicine, Health, Arts, Literature, Therapeutic

## Introduction

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that tries to enrich the practice of medicine and health care by integrating the humanities, social sciences, and arts into medical education, research, and patient care. The humanities is main factor in improving four basic arts, including language, literary criticism, and historiography (Crane, 1967). Medical Humanities is concerned with provoking empathy, compassion and deep understanding of both patients and health professionals. By incorporating different majors like history, arts, literature, Medical humanities serves an holistic approach in healthcare, fostering narrative experience and critical thinking in health care. Jonathan Culler notes, the humanities leads us astray: "The humanities shares a strong link between the critical thinking and critical human behaviour." (Jones et.al, 2014) This interdisciplinary approach not only examines how arts reflect human psyche but also analyses the artistic, social, and cultural nuances of a work. Medical humanities can lead to more patient-centred care, improves

communication, and better health outcomes. Paintings are worth depicting numerous ideas and also reflects the artists ideology. Hence, aesthetic sense is not specific to artists alone and can be accessed by every individual (Housen, 2001). Painting reflects human thoughts and suffering linked with the particular periods cultural and social influence. Hence, the paper demonstrates how art besides artistic sense, creates a connection between the mental stability and talent of an individual. Edward Munch's, *The Sick Child* as an art is an expression of mental suffering and societal trauma with the influence of social stigmas and improper medical amenities. This paper analyses the effects of painting in cleansing of thoughts and expression of suffering. Furthermore, it examines the interconnectedness between art and medicine and how arts aids in healing and recovering an individual from the existing illness.

### **The Integration of Art and Medicine**

The Norwegian artist Edward Munch's, *The Sick Child* was originally exhibited in the year 1893. Munch painted it in 6 different pieces using lithography, dry point and etching over a 40 year period. Munch's strokes and colours of the painting demonstrates his own state of mind and mental dilemma over his lost ones. Munch's family suffered from illness like schizophrenia, depression and tuberculosis. He was deeply affected by these health ailments and the death of his sister Johanne Sophie. *The Sick Child* represents Edward Munch's sister Sophie in her death bed, directly depicting the sorrow, and emotional turmoil of the patient and family. The painting indirectly reflects Munch's anger, lose of hope on the medical amenities of the 19th century. *The Sick Child* portrays Munch's sister Sophie, a young girl with dry, greyish hair, dark circles on her eyes and dull, frail skin texture representing illness. The pale bedspread, green gowns, white bed, and Sophie accompanied by a care taker on her side shows a hospital setting. The yellow and grey colour depict a sickly tone and red colour lines represent the blood and diseased state of Tuberculosis patient. Munch's six different pieces of *The Sick Child* displays a lady weeping in her hands, pillow half covering the mirror and Sophie looking at the dark curtain, foreshadows death. Munch's painting indirectly reflects 19th century's widespread tuberculosis disease and the lack of medical amenities to aid in health care. Also, the confined and congested dark, dull setting depicts the practise of isolating patients to avoid the spread of disease. Munch became concerned with the art that his grief made him to reconsider and repaint his work numerous times. In comparison to *The Sick Child*, Munch's other painting titled *The Scream* depicts his mental dilemma and hallucinations, giving a broader sense of view on inner and outer turmoil. Here, arts focus on the developing the empathetic skills and remains to be partly autobiographical. From health humanities perspective, the painting is an art of self confession, storytelling through silence and self healing. It is a medium to express the grief and panic- stricken state of an artist, thereby remains therapeutic. Also, paintings has the ability to capture raw emotions, creativity and disturbed psyche of artist. This, humanities in medicine integrate physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological elements, concerning patient-centred care. (Tischler, 2018) These paintings helps to discuss the need for mental health education among people and adds to community development and social development

### **Materials and Methods**

#### **Research Design**

This research employs a comprehensive and structured methodology to investigate and analyse the integration of health care perspectives within arts and humanities. The paper includes analysis of articles, comparison of several related works and reviews, and other sources interlinking the field of art and medicine. Furthermore, it aims to exploredifferent perspective and recent trends in the field of Medical Humanities and Health Humanities, facilitating medical discourse.

### **Methodology**

The Visual Thinking Strategy uses Arts to teach the visual comprehension and interpretation, critical thinking and developing communication skills so as to express and communicate the ideas (Yenawine, 2013). The Sick Child's interpretation using VTS expands the critical thinking ability to decode, interpret, analyse a painting in numerous ways.

Firstly, this strategy helps in keen observation of an art helping in developing observation skills. Secondly, it analyses the colour patterns, pictorial representations and symbols effects on the artwork. Lastly, it creates a broader perspective on the artists inner psyche and social context. The central concept of VTS is not completely focused on understanding the idea of the image, but also developing an evidence based observation and thinking (Abedi, et al., 2022). Furthermore, the Art Historical Analysis of the painting revealed its significance within the context of Expressionism referring to the expression of subjective thoughts, and emotive ideas of Munch. The iconographic analysis of the painting revealed the use of symbolic elements, such as the child's frail body and the sombre colours of the sickroom, to convey the intensity of the child's suffering. The contextual analysis examines the historical context of Munch's time period with the spread of diseases, lower economic rates and less medical amenities. Through a critical analysis of Edward Munch's iconic painting, "The Sick Child," this study reveals the complex emotional, psychological, and social dynamics in the artwork.

### **Findings and Results**

#### **Art as Therapeutic and Self Confession**

Munch's personal experience of losing his sister Sophie to tuberculosis is a pivotal aspect of the painting's emotional resonance. The painting serves as a poignant expression of the artist's sense of helplessness in the face of illness and death. It indirectly helps in reducing the burden and trauma on a therapeutic basis. The paper further sheds light on the advantage of expression of thoughts and reduced language barrier in arts.

#### **The Intersection of Art and Medicine**

The Sick Child's different colour combinations reflects the Munch's personal experience and mental trauma. The dark colours, the dreary skin tone and her pale look focuses on the individual's emotional experience, rather than the external world which reflects Munch's interest in the inner lives and psychological struggles of his subjects (Launer, 2021). This introspective approach, characteristic of Expressionism, depicting reality adds depth and complexity to the painting, making it a powerful exploration of the human psyche. The research helps in widening the perspectives of humanities and medical science in provoking empathy among professional, thereby bridging the gaps of health care.

#### **Social and Cultural Context**

The painting's time period signifies a change in the socio-cultural living of people, and thereby adds complexity to the interpretation of the painting. The age witnessed the rise of tuberculosis and other airborne disease, reducing life expectancy. Patients undergoing treatments are forced to isolate themselves within a specific location until they are declared non-infectious and have healthy test reports (Barberis et al., 2017). This isolation and limited medical treatments and lack of medicines affected Munch's family. They suffered from medical ailments with no proper health care and so paintings remained to be his only source of survival and healing. The research helps in understanding the age epidemics effects on public health and welfare.

## **Inclusion of Medical Humanities**

Medicine linked with a humanistic approach leads to an holistic effect in humanities. The framing of arts curriculum, narrative experiences, seminars, introducing literary works, subjecting people to paintings can reduce the suffering and strengthen the clinical expertise. The teaching of humanities in medicine classrooms enhances active participation of students and is a contrast to the traditional schools of teaching. Humanities helps students to reflect and express their ideas and views on a art work, facilitating better understanding and thinking. Therefore, Medical Humanities aids in creating a holistic approach towards illness and care.

## **Conclusion**

This research paper explores the interdisciplinary realm of health humanities in literature, delving into the complex relationships between arts, science, and health care. By examining the paintings symbolic and artistic elements, this study highlights the intersection of arts in medicine serving as a tool for self-expression and self healing. The research underscores the significance of integrating therapeutic practices with artistic expression, fostering a deeper understanding of one's mental and physical well-being. In recent times, arts creates a medium to enter into the world of others, to reflect, feel, imagine, empathize the trauma of people and aids in overcoming the mental turmoil. Ultimately, this study paves the way for future research to explore the applications of arts in medicine, promoting human well-being.

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