

# Literature and Medicine: A General Survey of Camaraderie

**A. Dhandapani**

*Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of English (Aided)  
Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore  
(Affiliated to Bharathiar University)*

## OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 1

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Dhandapani, A., et al.  
“Literature and Medicine:  
A General Survey of  
Camaraderie.” *Shanlax  
International Journal  
of Arts, Science and  
Humanities*, vol. 12,  
no. S1, 2025, pp. 133–36.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/  
sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8960](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS1-Apr.8960)

**Dr. R. Sumathi**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English (Aided)  
Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore  
(Affiliated to Bharathiar University)*

**Dr. P. Sujatha**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English (Aided)  
Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Coimbatore  
(Affiliated to Bharathiar University)*

## Abstract

*The faculty of literary inquiry keeps expanding at every moment. It has become unimaginably interdisciplinary. While medical humanities seek literary applications to enhance the humane component in the medical pedagogy and practice, the literary scholarship strives to understand medicine in a light environment through literary works. The narrative framework of these literary works offers various ways of understanding the body in the texts, exploring relationships between the patients and the doctors, the pressures on the physicians known as ‘the doctors’ dilemma,’ ethical principles, therapeutic potential of the language, etc. Hence, there is a great potential in instigating an investigative, research-oriented and pedagogical inquiry into the field of Literature and Medicine.*

**Keywords:** Literature and Medicine, Medical Narratives, Medical Humanities, Doctor and Patient, Ethicality, Text and Body, Mortality, Madness and Disability, Etc.

## Literature and Medicine: A General Survey of Camaraderie

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the use of literature in the medical arena for a variety of purposes. For starters, its use as a pedagogical tool for medical students has aided in the development of crucial professional qualities that are difficult to teach through standard biology education alone. Second, personal stories have become an engaging approach to learn about how individuals cope with their disease. Finally, the value of literary work as a tool for improving patient quality of life is beginning to be recognised. Finally, literature is a crucial educational component that can improve doctor-patient relationships by facilitating a better knowledge of disorders.

It is vital to recall that physicians were typically well-educated members of today’s world. In reality, those doctors were the first to

receive education in the Western World. An experience in the clinical setting is frequently very powerful to be comprehended solely through the design of biology. While, a narrative can offer notions not found in typical medical discourse. This answers the question, why is there an interest between literature and medicine (Banos and Guardiola).

Quite obvious is the fact that the discipline of clinical studies needs to be introduced and learned in a systematic and comprehensive manner. A purely bio-scientific paradigm of medicine, on the other hand, ignores the moral and artistic components of patient encounters, providing a narrow vision of human illness. This viewpoint has resulted in an increased recognition of the usefulness of the arts in the pedagogy of medicine, corresponding to the flourishing discipline of medically derived humanities, where literature performs essential part.

Literature serves to align the readers and the physicians' focus upon the plight of the patients. Hospitals are important sites for individuals because they are humans are born and end up fatefully. The encounters between patient and health-care workers in such settings might be spectacular or life-changing. Even though the importance might be forgotten by students in medicine during their hectic schedules on clinical training, reading literature can help them re-attach to the experience of the patients.

Analysing literature from the distant past can provide students with a reasonably secure area to deal their emotions, such as sadness, judgement, or detachment, without feeling obligated to comply with present-day standards of how they must behave. It was discovered that Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Illych*, written over a century ago, was an efficient tool for introducing new ethical principles to less experienced medical students. At this stage, the purpose is to broaden pupils' reactions rather than shape them. The most essential realisation about literature is that it is not intended to have only one meaning (Haensel).

As a part of literary curriculum, the exploration of medical themes in existing literary works serves to sharpen the interdisciplinary attitude needed for the development of wholesome humanities. It is only in the literary classroom a medical humanities course becomes a feasible option. The connection between medical education and literary studies is an important one. The close association between literature and medicine was always explored in the field of literary studies. Examples include the depths of the mental state and bodily role in the field of health-sciences, medical professionals, illness & healing, hospitalisations & impairment, sexuality & sex, and mortality and demise. However, the field of medicine has had to establish an occasion for reading literary works. All cultures' literature has placed a strong emphasis on health. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag makes the case that studying literature as produced, as discussion with real-world echoes and manifestations, is necessary because language can be just as harmful as bodily suffering. When a patient hears the word "cancer" for the first time in a physician's clinic, the word alone is equated to a deadly scenario. Thus becomes clear, Sontag's example. The pupils would be motivated to question how we create binary distinctions between reality and depiction, suffering and articulation, sane and madness, normal and aberrant, healthy and ill self, and disability and ability (Prabhu).

Literature and medicine both accept the reciprocity and convergence between their two traditions. The themes and issues of medicine cast a shadow over literature, and medicine appreciates the diagnostic and therapeutic potential of language. When authors like Sophocles, Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Dante, Jane Austen, Henry James, Leo Tolstoy, George Eliot, Thomas Mann, or Michael Ondaatje search for metaphors and plots that are deep and intricate enough to convey basic human problems, they often turn towards birth (and everything that is necessary for it), reproductive decisions (marriages), suffering (physical as well as spiritual), and demise (and everything that leads up to and culminates in it). Every doctor sees something every day that gives artists the opportunity to express and illustrate the most profound and pervasive facts about human life (Charon).

The depiction of the body in the text is an important parameter for discussing health-related issues in a lighter tone and setting. Kendrick W. Prewitt talks about the portrayal of classical human body in the work of John Donne, *Devotions*. John Donne writes the work when he is sick and in bed. The notion of the body he depicts in this work is symbolic of the societal odds and issues. The world is represented as a microcosm through the anatomy of the human body. Donne sets his own body as an example, where his muscles are taken as hills, his veins perceived as rivers, his thoughts compared to the dwelling creatures. This idea is represented in the work, "Meditation 4." Speaking about Donne's "Meditation 17," Prewitt says, "The body is significant only insofar as it fits into the cosmic scheme. Donne's meditations take his mind far from the immediate circumstances of his body and his sickbed to larger issues of the perils of solitude and the condition of humanity, as epitomized in one of his best-known writings, 'Meditation 17' (82).

In order to understand an illness, the sociocultural context is important and is the key for exploring patient-doctor relationships. A patient's suffering and illness is seen reflected in the stories he or she presents. The diagnosis, symptoms and signs of a bodily disorder and disease tend to lose meanings when removed from social contexts.

There are a lot of medical issues to be explored in classical old literary texts. Taking Shakespeare's work, *King Lear* as an instance, a lot can be learned about old age, debility, madness, suicidal tendencies, etc. The characters, Lear and Gloucester are principal representations of elderly people with signs and symptoms of madness. The symptoms seem to be manifested in forms like, delirium, depression and dementia readily discoverable in their actions which lack rational basis. Both the figures, Lear and Gloucester exhibit lack of judgement, the former dividing the kingdom unequally and the latter mistrusting his own son. They become victims in due course losing their shelter. Despite the events getting back to normal, Lear's insanity does not fully fade away. Gloucester, on the other hand develops suicidal tendencies.

In another classical text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Dieter J. Boxmann writes about the treatment of the abnormal biology and physique, whose treatment within the societal framework evokes questions of impact of the external on the internal, that is, the environment's influence on the body: "The story raises useful questions about the impact of external environments on internal states. Its treatment of disease and deformity in the depiction of Frankenstein's monster as a depraved, stigmatized, and morally suspect 'other' echoes the culture's propensity to treat the 'abnormal' as abject and suspect" (178).

Among a lot of widespread issues that prevail in the medically themed narrative fiction, a primary issue of significant focus is laid upon the dilemma of the doctors. The physician's world is seen as divided from that of others. The novel, *Other Women's Children* by Perri Klass talks about a female paediatrician's emotional separation from her family in the attempt of caring for a young HIV victim. The idea of institutional pressures upon the doctors is yet another issue of concern. The novel, *Arrowsmith* by Sinclair Lewis deals with such themes alongside exhibiting ideas of patient pressures, institutional constraints, ethical problems and the prioritization of patients' needs.

As stated earlier, the human body is metaphorically represented as a microcosm of the society. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre mentions about the novel, *Cancer Ward* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn:

*Cancer Ward takes place in an urban hospital in the Soviet Union. The main character is a young man recently discharged from prison and now in exile, undergoing radiation therapy. . . . medical themes are treated both literally and metaphorically; the culture of the cancer ward provides a prototype of the state, and cancer, a metaphor for totalitarianism. Issues of medical authority, patient's rights, and informed consent are particularly foregrounded in this novel. (192)*

There is real potential in instigating an investigative, research-oriented and pedagogical inquiry into the field of Literature and Medicine. Literary fiction is grounded and manifested as narratives.

They have the capacity to probe medical and bodily issues because literary figures are nothing but the representations of the human world. The characters behave just as any other human being in reality. The physiology in the form of biology is connected to psychology and the mind-body dualism is often the parameter that human actions, decisions and communication that form the basis of literary plots. By getting acquainted with the medical inclinations of literary fiction, the values that entwined with the bodily aspects can be brought to the forefront like ethicality in medical procedures, invasion of bodily premises, societal perceptions of the body, etc.

### References

1. Banos, Josep Eladi and Elena Guardiola. "Literature in Medical Teaching: The Crucial Importance of Literature in the Education of Medical Students." *Metode Science Studies Journal*, no. 8, 2018, pp. 215-221. Metode, <https://doi.org/10.7203/metode.8.10555>.
2. Boxmann, Dieter J. "Rhetoric and the Politics of Medical Persuasion." *Teaching Literature and Medicine*, edited by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Modern Language Association, 2000, p. 178.
3. Charon, Rita. "At the Membranes of Care: Stories in Narrative Medicine." *Academic Medicine*, vol. 87, no. 3, pp. 342-347. LWW Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0b013e3182446fbb>.
4. ---. "Literature and Medicine: Origins and Destinies." *Academic Medicine*, vol. 75, no. 1, Jan 2000, pp. 23-27. LWW JOURNALS, [journals.lww.com/academicmedicine / Fulltext/2000/01000/Literature\\_and\\_Medicine\\_\\_Origins\\_and\\_Destinies.8.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Fulltext/2000/01000/Literature_and_Medicine__Origins_and_Destinies.8.aspx).
5. Conwill, Martin. "The Benefit of Literature to a Medical Student." *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*, [hekint.org/2017/01/29/the-benefit-of-literature-to-a-medical-student/](http://hekint.org/2017/01/29/the-benefit-of-literature-to-a-medical-student/).
6. Donohoe, Martin. "Exploring the Human Condition: Literature and Public Health Issues." *Teaching Literature and Medicine*, edited by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Modern Language Association, 2000, pp. 96-97.
7. Haensel, Erik. "The Humanity of Medicine: A Case for Literature and Subjectivity in Medical Education." *UBCMJ*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2019, pp. 21-22.
8. McDonald, Paula, et al. "Clinical Realism: A New Literary Genre and a Potential Tool for Encouraging Empathy in Medical Students." *BMC Medical Education*, vol.15, no.112, 03 July 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-015-0372-8>.
9. McEntyre, Marilyn Chandler. "Touchstones: A Brief Survey." *Teaching Literature and Medicine*, edited by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Modern Language Association, 2000, p. 192.
10. Prabhu, Gayathri. "Medical Themes in a Literature Classroom: An Alternate Perspective on Medical Humanities Pedagogy in India." *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, 07 Aug 2018, <https://doi.org/10.20529/IJME.2018.060>.
11. Prewitt, Kendrick W. "Teaching the Body in Texts: Literature, Culture, and Religion." *Teaching Literature and Medicine*, edited by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins and Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Modern Language Association, 2000, p. 82.