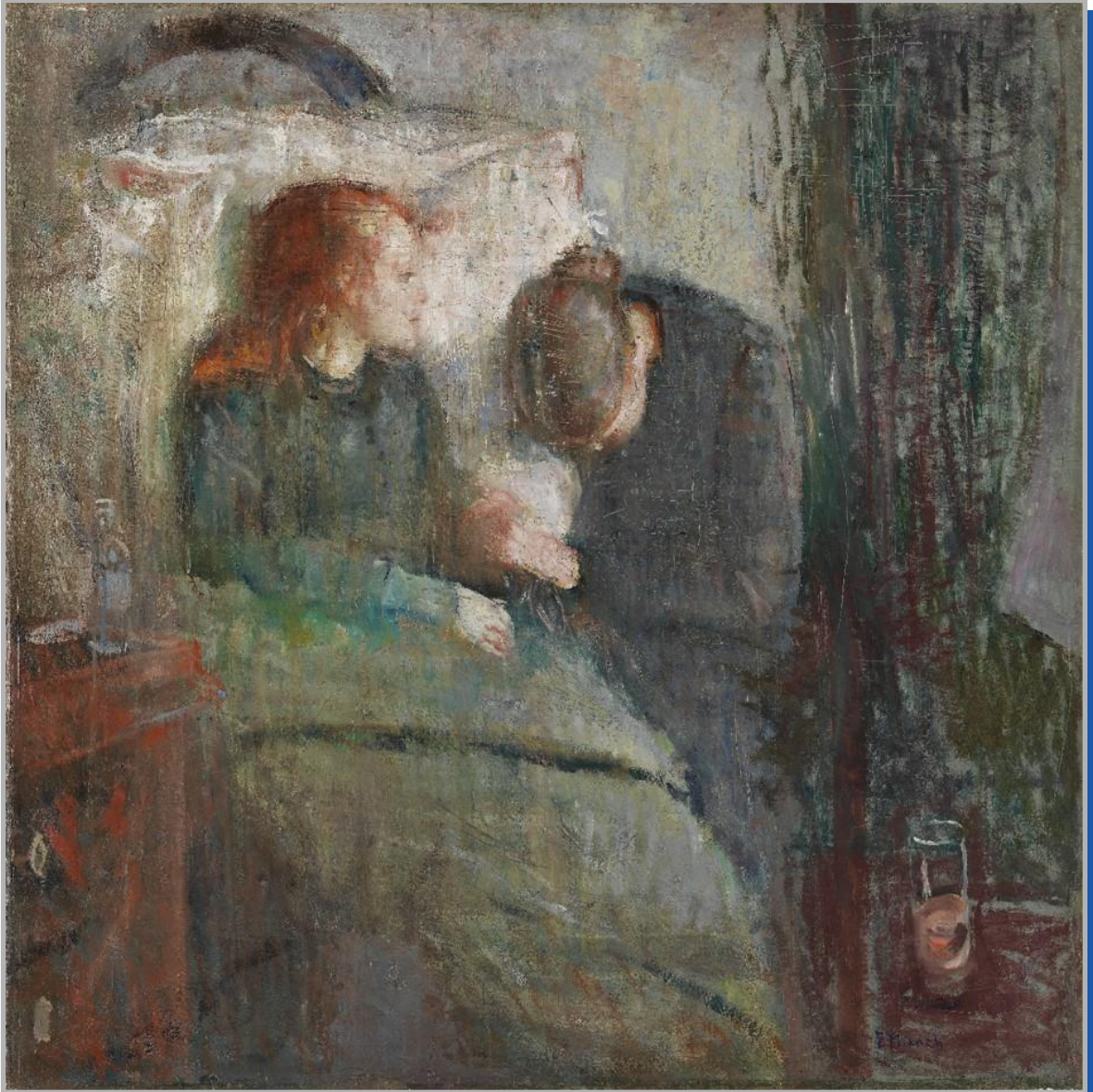


THE SICK GIRL – EDVARD MUNCH

REVIEW BY TRACY LEVETT-JONES



1

The Sick Child (original version) (1885) by Edvard Munch - Nasjonalmuseet / Høstland, Børre, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37692571>

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BACKGROUND

'*The Sick Child*' is the title given to six paintings and a number of other works of art created by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch over a 40-year period (1885 and 1926). Each of them illustrates a significant moment in Munch's life, the death of his 15-year-old sister Johanne Sophie from tuberculosis. Munch returned to this deeply distressing event over and over again in his art, perhaps as a way of depicting his feelings of despair and loss. The paintings have been described as a vivid study of the ravages of a degenerative disease (Eisenman, Crow & Lukacher, 2007). *The Sick Child* was first shown 1886 and, because of Munch's unorthodox use of impressionistic techniques, the painting was met with both outrage and acclaim. However, it has remained one of Munch's best known works. Over 40 years later, the Nazis classified Munch's paintings as 'degenerate art' and removed them from German museums. The works, which included *The Sick Child*, were taken to Berlin to be auctioned. A Norwegian art dealer acquired the painting; and it was later purchased by Thomas Olsen and donated to the Tate Gallery in London.

The Sick Child shows Johanne Sophie in profile lying on her deathbed. She seems to be in pain and experiencing difficulty breathing, a symptom of advanced tuberculosis. Johanne is propped up by a large white pillow which partially hides the circular mirror hung on the wall behind her, and she is covered by a heavy dark blanket. She has red hair and is shown as frail and with a sickly pallor and vacant stare. Johanne looks towards a dark full-length curtain to her left, which many art historians interpret as a symbol of death (Donahue, 1996).

A dark-haired woman in a black dress sits beside Johanne, clutching her hand. She appears grief-stricken and her head is bowed as if she cannot bear to look the girl in the eye. The image of their joined hands depicts such pathos that art historians believe that the two figures share a deep emotional bond; and it is suggested that the woman is Johanne's Aunt Karen. Some critics believe that the older woman is more distressed than the child: 'It is almost as though the child, knowing that nothing more can be done, is comforting a person who has reached the end of her endurance' (Donahue, 1996, p. 433).

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Empathic imagination requires respectful curiosity and a desire to vicariously project oneself into another person's story. Empathic perception is the ability to 'read' or distil the feelings and meanings associated with another person's experience. Works of art such as *The Sick Girl* can be used to elicit both empathic imagination and empathic perception. This painting expresses the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty evident in many healthcare interactions, particularly those associated with loss, pain and suffering (Wikström, 2003). The ability to interpret the meanings associated with these experiences requires perceptual and intellectual effort.

The role of the educator when using paintings such as *The Sick Girl* is to create a 'safe' space for students to use their empathic imagination to explore the meaning of the painting from multiple perspectives. With the image of *The Sick Girl* projected on the screen and working in groups, students can be asked to put themselves in the artist's place, telling the story of the painting from his perspective and deciphering how he is demonstrating empathy through his work.

The questions below can be used as prompts during the group discussions:

- What are the different components/objects in the painting and what could they mean?
- What might the colours in the painting represent?
- What is the girl's facial expression telling us?
- Why is the positioning of the woman, and how she is placed in relation to the girl, significant?
- Why would Munch have located the clenched hands directly in the middle of the painting?

At the conclusion of the discussion the educator can reveal the history and purpose of Munch's painting. Students can then discuss how their interpretation differed or was similar to those of art historians.

When students have finished the interpretation of the painting from the artist's perspective, they can be encouraged to reflect on and discuss their own personal and professional experiences and memories of loss, pain and suffering, and how their new and emerging insights might help them in their future practice.

RELATED RESEARCH

Wikström (2003) conducted a randomized control trial to identify whether the use of *The Sick Girl* as a teaching intervention facilitated nursing students' understanding of empathy. Participants included first year nursing students (n = 144) from one university in Sweden. The results showed a significant impact with students in the visual art group more engaged in learning about empathy than those in the control group who participated in a visual art dialogue, but without access to the artwork. This study suggests that the use of works of art can complement theoretical approaches to learning about empathy in healthcare education.

LINKS

Empathy requires the ability to imagine or 'read' other people's thoughts and feelings and to use that understanding to help interpret people's behaviour and needs. A simple but illuminative activity for students to test their ability to interpret people's thoughts and feelings is the '*Reading the mind in the eyes test*'. This test has been used and validated across a number of cultural groups (Vellante & Baron-Cohen et al, 2013): <http://socialintelligence.labinthewild.org/mite/>

REFERENCES

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