My afflictions belong to me and my art—they have become one with me.
Without illness and anxiety, I would have been a rudderless ship.
—Edward Munch

Edvard Munch
A Study of Loss, Grief and Creativity
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Toward the end of the 19th century, at about the same time Sigmund Freud was investigating unconscious phenomena and the influence of childhood events on the causation of neurosis, a little known Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch (1863-1944), began to express his tormented inner world through his artistic creations, giving birth to an art style that would later be known as Expressionism.

Family Background
The most painful event in Edvard Munch’s life was the premature death of his mother from tuberculosis when he was five years old. This tragedy was compounded when his older sister, Sophie, to whom he had become attached in her place, also died of tuberculosis when Munch was thirteen. In addition to these two major losses during Munch’s critical stages of development, his father became emotionally unavailable when he suffered an agitated depression of psychotic proportions, associated with religious preoccupations, after his wife’s death. All this trauma was intensified by the poverty experienced by the Munch family, despite the fact that Edvard’s father was a physician.
Besides his older sister Sophie, Munch had three younger siblings. Peter Andreas, two years younger than Edvard, was a physician, who married, and died at age thirty of pneumonia. Edvard's sister Laura, four years his junior, developed a schizoaffectionate illness during her adolescence and required intermittent lifelong hospitalizations for mental illness. She died of cancer in 1926. The youngest child, Inger, remained unmarried, outlived Edvard, and compiled a book of family letters. Shortly after Edvard's mother died, her younger sister, Karen, came to the family home to care for the children, and it was she who encouraged Munch's art studies, despite Dr. Munch's disapproval.

Although Mrs. Munch described Edvard as a "healthy, rambunctious rascal" in a letter written to a friend a few months before her death, his health after her death was poor, marked by frequent respiratory illnesses which recurred throughout his life. It is not surprising that with Munch's background of multiple childhood losses, illness, and poverty that his art would later be described by many critics as "melancholy."

Themes in Art

Prior to Munch's formal art studies, he drew both himself and his family. He began producing self-portraits in his late teens and continued throughout his life until he died at age seventy two. A noticeable aspect concerning his self-portraits is that none of them show him smiling. In fact, in many, his mouth is turned downward, his shoulders sag, and in a number of paintings he produced furrows in his forehead, similar to Darwin's description of "grief muscles."

Munch's early work (1800-85) fell into the category of Naturalism both because of its subject matter, which was often a critical commentary on society, and its realistic style. He broke from this school when he was 22 years old and produced what is considered his first major work—The Sick Child. The picture recalls a scene that occurred in reality when his sister Sophie was dying of tuberculosis. Munch painted this picture six times during the course of his life and wrote that he experienced grief in its fullest sense in the reworking of this memory of his dying sister.

In the period that followed (1890's), Munch developed his unique expressionistic style and produced a large group of paintings that dealt with his feelings and childhood memories. His themes were love, loss of love, grief, despair, loneliness, jealousy, anxiety, attachment, engulfment, separation and death. He later grouped these pictures together and called them The Frieze of Life. One of the most widely known pictures belonging to this group is entitled The Scream, which shows a disintegrating, fetus-like figure on a bridge, with an undulating sunset and coastline, along with two vaguely drawn human figures retreating in the background. Although many interpretations have been made about this picture, it seems to represent loss: loss of the self (disolving figure), loss of the day (sunset) and the loss of his parents (two figures). Like so many of his works, Munch reproduced this picture many times, in a number of different media.

Relationships with Women

During Munch's early art career, he lived in Norway where he was connected with a group of Oslo Bohemians who advocated free love. He then began a six year obsession with a married woman, "Mrs. Heiberg," who resembled his own mother in appearance and in the fact that she was married to a physician. In recalling the unsatisfying relationship, Munch wrote, "Is it because she took my first kiss that she took the perfume of life from me?"
Munch spent most of his time in Germany during the 1890's, as a member of the Berlin Bohemians. He became infatuated with the wife of another member of the group, an exiled Norwegian named Dagne Juell, repeating his earlier frustrating and ultimately painful attachment to a married woman. This involvement resulted in a number of pictures in which he, Dagne, and a man appear.

At about this same time, Munch also became entangled with a wealthy Norwegian, Tulla Larsen, who pursued him relentlessly and tried to trick him into marriage. This relationship led to a violent quarrel and an accidental shooting, which cost him the loss of the top two joints of one of his fingers on the left hand, causing him considerable physical and emotional pain.

Munch's disappointing relationships with women resulted in a number of heavily affect-laden paintings. In 1893, he painted a picture called Death and the Maiden which shows a woman embracing a skeleton. In Vampire (1893), a woman's head is buried in a man's neck and in the picture Harpy, he produced a birdlike woman tearing out a man's innards. During this period, he also painted a series of pictures depicting a dying or dead mother with a child near her bedside, indicating that his most unfulfilled relationship with a woman was the interrupted attachment between him and his mother due to her premature death.

Hospitalization

While Munch's art flourished in the early 1900's, his emotional and physical health deteriorated. He had a number of hospitalizations for respiratory problems, "nerves," and alcoholism. He suffered from chronic depression and many phobias (agoraphobia, germ-phobia, etc.). He complained of insomnia and had many somatic symptoms (chest pains, gastrointestinal problems and headaches). He was suspicious of people, and when he used alcohol, his paranoia increased to the point where he got into barroom brawls. He also experienced hallucinations, usually during alcoholic bouts or febrile illness.

After a three-day alcoholic binge in the autumn of 1908, Munch admitted himself to Dr. Daniel Jacobson's psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen for an illness characterized by depression, anxiety, phobias and paranoid ideation. For seven or eight months, Munch received a spa and massage daily, low current electricity treatments, pine needle baths, open air treatments, a healthy diet and attention from the nurses and his physician. He was encouraged to continue his artwork and during his hospital stay he painted his doctor, nurses, fellow patients and a few friends who visited him. Several months after entering the hospital he wrote to his Aunt Karen:

There is a competent doctor here and kind people—I hope after a few months to be able to put behind me the old unpleasantness and become a new person.
Later years

Munch’s hospitalization seemed to cure him of his alcoholism. He returned to Norway, at age forty five, a changed man. Although major changes in his work had already occurred as early as 1902, after his psychiatric treatment in 1908-09, the content of his art seemed to deal more with the positive aspects of the external world and less with his troubled intrapsychic world. He continued, however, to rework his old themes, intermittently, until the end of his life.

During the last thirty five years of his life, Munch lived in Norway, becoming a recluse, avoiding human contact and devoting himself to his work. He abstained from alcohol, cigarettes and women. He continued to experience anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms, but these did not interfere with his ability to work. Although he was encouraged by his physician, Dr. Schreiner, to seek help for his emotional problems, he said he felt his creativity might be destroyed if he were treated.

Munch maintained a correspondence with his Aunt Karen, who died in 1931, and his sister Inger throughout his life, but did not enjoy visiting them. He had housekeepers, but they usually quit working for him, complaining that Munch would never talk to them. In addition to his few physician friends, he had a relationship with a businessman/art dealer, Rolf Stenersen, who wrote his biography at Munch’s request, entitled Edvard Munch: Close-up of a Genius.

Stenersen says later in life Munch developed a very intense relationship to his paintings and actually talked about them as if they were living people. When he was offered a large amount of money for a painting he did not want to part with, he said, “I must have some of my friends on the walls.” Although Munch was always attached to his paintings, after his illness in 1908, they seemed to replace his relationships with people.

Edvard Munch died on January 23, 1944, at the age of eighty, of pneumonia, complicated by cardiovascular disease. He had spent the morning working on a portrait of his old friend from his Oslo Bohemian days, Hans Jaeger, who had died over thirty years earlier.

Discussion

Munch’s contribution to the world of art was his presentation of familiar objects in a new expressive form (often distorted) that conveyed feelings. In this respect his art is a major link between representational and non-representational styles—a stepping stone on the path from Realism to Abstract Expressionism.

The sources of Munch’s art can be found in his inherited natural talent, his identification with his mother, aunt and other family members who were artists, as well as his need to record his feelings and experiences in his lifelong attempt to understand himself and the meaning of his life.

Munch was greatly affected by the many losses he experienced in his life, and his grief became a major motif in his art. In attempting to work through his grief, Munch visually re-created his mother, father and sister, many times. In a normal grief process, this would allow gradual diminishing of the pain of loss. For Munch, this was not to be.

The death of Munch’s mother was the major disruption of attachment in his life, and this trauma severely affected the development of his subsequent object relationships. Although some children may experience an adaptive mourning process, it appears from all evidence available (Munch’s art, diaries, letters, autobiographies and the observations of those who knew him), that Munch waged a lifelong struggle to recover his lost love object, using a group of defenses often seen in pathological grief reactions, according to Bowlby.

Munch’s longing for reunion with his mother and his inability to give her up is manifested in his repeated paintings of her (and symbolic representations of her) in an attempt to recreate his lost love object. This action is best described by M. Robbins: “The creative process is set in motion when painful affects related to object loss and object hunger threaten to become conscious... In this way the artist creates his own world of objects which he may then possess and maintain, thus avoiding for the time, the pain of loss.”

Despite his efforts to resurrect his lost mother, both in his art and in his relationships with older, married women, Munch was
doomed to an unending repetition of failure and disappointment when fusion and re-union did not occur. Munch’s development of lifelong respiratory illness (similar to the disease that took his mother’s life) may have been related to a pathologic identification with her.

Although Munch’s repressed hostility toward his mother for leaving him was transferred to other women (both in reality and in his art), he was able, through the process of splitting, to preserve the good mother with whom he would be reunited in heaven (she had promised this to her children shortly before her death), while, at the same time, attacking the bad mother (including women he had encountered in his adult life) who had abandoned him. Munch saw the union between man and woman as leading to ego dissolution or death. Hence women were seen, via a projection of his own oral aggressive wishes, as sadistic vampires who sucked life’s blood from men.

In spite of the fact that there appears to be a more positive change in the way Munch depicts women in his paintings after his treatment with Dr. Jacobson, there also seems to be evidence of even further withdrawal from any real relationships. After his hospitalization, Munch removed himself to a solitary existence where he could create a controlled environment and where he could maintain a semblance of self-autonomy without the fear of disintegration or engulfment. Munch’s self-imposed exile and schizoid withdrawal helped him avoid the revival of regressive anxieties, paranoid ideation and painful feelings of jealousy, depression and anger that relationships with people engendered. While isolated, he was able to spend all of his time painting, and through his creativity he was able to gratify many of his needs.

Through his art he could visually recreate the dead members of his family, thereby denying his loss and the painful feelings associated with his tragic past. He could project emotions onto his paintings that he found unacceptable in himself—jealousy, hostility, and sexuality. He was also able to express feelings toward his paintings—to love them and scold them. The paintings allowed Munch to diminish his feelings of envy toward the reproductive and nurturing woman through his fantasies that he also could give birth and nurture. He was the mother/father unit to his “children.” He could reduce his anxiety and depression so long as he was around his artwork.

His paintings allowed him to deal with his dependency needs by providing him with money. Hence, he had the illusion of independence. He experienced fame (he received the Order of St. Olaf from Norway in 1909), which was narcissistically gratifying and assured him a form of immortality, thus mitigating his own fear of death. Munch’s art also helped him cope with his guilt for the imagined responsibility he felt (like most children) over his losses by creating a product via the reparative process.

Harry B. Lee believes that the artist creates in order to deal with anxiety due to an intense dread of loss of love from maternal figures. The artist’s hostile destructive impulses, when frustrated, lead to guilt and a need for punishment. Creativity is an attempt to undo the loss and win forgiveness and approval. The artist wants a fantasized reunion with the frustrating bad mother, symbolically, via the newly created aesthetically satisfying product, in order to recapture infantile magical omnipotence.

The infant deals with stress through the use of a transitional object, for example, a pacifier. Volkan and Josephthal report that the adult who suffers separation anxiety and pathologic grief may reactivate in his regression just such an archaic way of dealing with stress.