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Love, fear, and desire. Edvard Munch's ambivalent attitude towards women examined through the analysis of two representative examples of his paintings: *The Sick Child* (1886) and *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900).

Edvard Munch was a prolific and successful Norwegian painter with a career span of over sixty years, who despite initial difficulties became internationally renowned and 'one of Modernism's most significant artists' (munchmuseet, n.d.). He experimented with various art movements from Naturalism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, yet he is mostly considered a Symbolist and the precursor of Expressionism. John Launer (2021, p.747) maintains that his 'style … is instantly recognisable' and George A. Beller (2006, p.309) adds that his art 'depicts elemental aspects of human psychology love, melancholy, despair, fear, jealousy, and death.' Munch never married and his relationships with women were complicated what resulted in contradictory opinions among his biographers and art critics. While Rebecca McEwen (2018, p.34) maintains that 'since 1893 when he shifted from Impressionism to Symbolism … his art was overwhelmingly misogynistic', J. Gill Holland (2005, p.3-4) argues that 'a balanced look at the full range of his pictures and … reading the pages of his journal refute that charge.'

The aim of this paper will be to examine Edvard Munch's ambivalent attitude towards women through the critical analysis of two artworks, the early painting *The Sick Child* (1886) (Fig.1), essential for the Munch's career and the later one, *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) (Fig.2), using two methodologies. The external circumstances which affected the artist's

style of work and chosen themes will be the focus of the biographical methodology, and the critical theory of psychoanalysis will look how the artist's psyche influenced them.

The significant elements of Munch's biography will be outlined and followed by an introduction to Freud's and Jung's theories, chosen for the scope of this paper as the most relevant. Sigmund Freud maintained that events and traumas experienced in childhood have a significant impact on a person's development, affecting their life and determining their future, what Munch's art and personal life confirms. Carl Jung's theory of archetypes is well represented throughout Munch's oeuvre and evident on paintings which are the subject of this study. The last section will analyse both paintings and the results will be summarised in the conclusion.

Edvard Munch (1863 – 1944) was born in Löten, Norway, as the second child of Laura Bjølstad and a military doctor, Christian Munch, but the family soon moved to Christiania (Kristiania), now Oslo (Chorba and Jereb, 2017). Munch had an older sister, his beloved Sophie, two younger ones, and a younger brother. The children were orphaned by their mother who died of tuberculosis when Edvard was only five. Their father did not take the blow easily, he got severely depressed and, always being excessively religious, he insisted that the disease was 'a form of punishment from God' (Turova, 2008 p.42). Laura's sister, Karen, moved in to help and it was her who supported Edvard's plans to study art against his father's disapproval, but for unknown reason the artist later grew to dislike his aunt (Skryabin et al., 2020). Edvard also developed tuberculosis in his teens, however, while 'in the pre-antimicrobial drug era, the case-fatality rate for TB was 70%' he unexpectedly survived (Chorba and Jereb, 2017 p.562). His favourite sister though died of tuberculosis at only fifteen, while '[A]nother sister … developed a schizoaffective disorder as a teenager and was periodically hospitalised in psychiatric clinics (and) Edvard's brother … died of pneumonia at the age of thirty' (Skryabin et al., 2020 p.571). These tragedies traumatised the young artist and filled him with a lifelong fear of illness, death, and loss. He disturbingly

claimed, ‘I inherited two of mankind’s most frightful enemies—consumption and insanity’ (Munch cited in Potter, 2011 p.573).

As a student, Munch joined the creative bohemian circles of artists and writers, decadent and fascinated by the idea of free love, what led to the first of his many troubled relationships with a married woman, Milly Thaulow (Skryabin et al., 2020). This unfulfilled ‘desire for constancy and tenderness in a woman (and) Munch’s unsuccessful efforts to master the original traumas, as well as his unresolved oedipal issues' resulted in ‘painful repetition of these experiences’ (Winer cited in Skryabin et al., 2020 p.572). Such lifestyle, along with the increasing abuse of alcohol could not be accepted by the artist’s devotee father, therefore their relationship deteriorated, but the father’s sudden death in 1889, while Munch stayed in Paris, caused artist’s deep depression (Skryabin et al., 2020). The following years Munch spent ‘mainly in Berlin in 1892–95 and then in Paris in 1896–97, and he continued to move around extensively until he settled in Norway in 1910’ (Watson, 2024 para.5).

Skryabin et al. (2020) argue that even though the artist was aware of his traumas affecting his mental health, he refused to seek help for the fear of the negative effect of the healing process on his art. In 1908, as his psychotic symptoms worsened, he finally decided to admit himself into Dr Daniel Jacobson’s private clinic in Copenhagen, where he undergone various treatments including psychotherapy and nonconvulsive electrotherapy (Perciaccante et al., 2017). Sue Prideaux (cited in Perciaccante et al., 2017 p.72) mentions that Munch ‘experienced depression, euphoria, suicidal impulses and aggression’ while Perciaccante et al. (2017, p.72) add that he ‘was also affected by visual and auditory hallucinations … paranoia, panic attacks and recurrent paralysis.’ Despite his condition, Munch survived the 1918-19 pandemic of the Spanish flu in his house in Ekely, where he spent the rest of his life living on his own as an acclaimed and wealthy artist, until his death in January 1944 (Munchmuseet, n.d.).

As Polyxeni Potter (2011) observes, Munch's era was shaken by Freud's revolutionary theories, therefore, it is possible that his art was either consciously or unconsciously performed act of psychoanalysis. Potter (2011, p.573) adds that 'pain and suffering fueled his creativity and guided his art' through which 'he sought to recreate his troubled childhood and his lifelong struggle with physical and mental illness.' Her opinion is supported by Ewa Mazierska (2009, p.120) who argues that 'Munch's reactions to earlier family tragedies and then to entirely his own love tragedies ... can be considered as illustrations of Freud's conceptions from his *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917).'

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) developed psychoanalysis as a method of treating emotional disorders, however, himself interested in history of art, he was also a precursor of using it to analyse various aspects of artworks. It can be used to address the theme and content of individual artworks, their relationship to their creators and their viewers, and the whole nature of creativity and art (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021 p.126,124). Freud argued that the necessity to work for money deprives people of satisfying their natural tendency to pleasure and this repressed desire can result in an internal conflict which leads to multiple mental disorders (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021). He considered that these 'instinctual energies' undergo a process of sublimation which diverts 'them from sexual aims to cultural forms' (Foster et al., 2016 p.22). Munch (2005, p.188) confirmed such sublimation by stating in his journals 'I believe I am suited only to paint pictures so I know that I must choose between love— and my work.'

The place where these repressed desires are stocked along with the childhood traumas Freud named the 'unconscious.' He divided the initial period of human life into stages during which we learn how to manage the libido which he considered 'the individual's psychic ... energy' (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021 p.124). One of these stages develops the Oedipus complex – a term originating from Greek mythology, where boys unconsciously desire their mothers, feel aggression, and envy their fathers, and as a result they embrace their masculinity by identifying themselves with their fathers (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021 p.125).

Where Freud examined individual unconscious, Carl Jung (1875-1961) came with the idea of a collective one and maintained that people are born with certain knowledge they are not aware of (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021). His theory of archetypes explores the images which have become key symbols present in all cultures and expressed through art, stories, philosophy, mythology, and dreams (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021). Among Jungian archetypes are images such as 'the mother, the … couple, … the child, and the maiden,' all present on the paintings which are subject of this study, and which as Jung argued, can haunt people with 'mental disturbances or illnesses' - such as Munch, because their exploration leads towards understanding, which is a part of a healing process (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021 p.128). Oskar Kokoschka (cited in Turova, 2008 p.48) observed that Munch 'had breathed a new spirit into the language of pictograms which is older than all spoken or written language' thus supporting the presence of Jungian archetypes in his art.

Fig.1 Munch, E. (1886) *The Sick Child* [Oil on canvas] Oslo: National Gallery.
Available at: https://www.wikiart.org/en/edvard-munch/the-sick-child-1886-0
[Accessed: 15th April 2024]

Out of his creative output of 'over 1800 paintings ... thousands of drawings, prints and photos ... sculptures ... and murals' it was *The Sick Child* (1886) (Fig.1) what Munch considered his most important painting (Launer, 2021 p.184). He declared '[M]ost of what I have done since was born in this painting' (Munch cited in Launer, 2021 p.747) and considered it to be his 'first break with impressionism' because 'under the violent confusions of soul and life in the bohemian days impressionism did not give (him) enough

expression (Munch, 2005 p.184). Hans Jæger, an anarchist, nihilist, and the leader of Munch's bohemian circle, encouraged the young artist to 'paint (his) own life' thus contributing to the origins of the painting 'hailed as the first expressionist masterpiece' (Potter, 2011 p.574). Turova (2008, p.40) argues that through that work Munch 'transcended the artistic conventions of his time and began to formulate ideas' preparing the basis for development of Expressionism, while the urge 'to express his moods and emotions became ... motivation' for his future creations. Indeed, as Launer (2021, p.747) confirms, with this work Munch 'established his characteristic style.'

This study will analyse the painting's first version, however, to stress its significance in the artist's oeuvre, it is important to note that in the space of over forty years '[He] painted the subject six times and also explored it in lithography, drypoint, and etching' (Potter, 2011 p.574). Launer (2021) argues that such obsessive return of a theme indicates Munch's attempt at coming to terms with the trauma caused by premature death of his beloved sister, Sophie. Mazierska (2009) supports this opinion maintaining that through a repetitive painting of *The Sick Child* (1886), the artist dealt with traumas experienced in his childhood, which in accordance with Freud's theory resulted in the lifelong fear of illness, loss, and loneliness. She points out that this was the artist's way of disarming the misfortunes which crashed his family (Mazierska, 2009). Therefore, the process of painting this subject was for Munch a form of psychoanalysis and autotherapy.

The painting depicts a teenage redhead girl on a deathbed turned towards an older woman sitting at her side, head bowed, overwhelmed by grief, clasping the girl's left hand in hers. The girl is pale, she sits supported by a huge white pillow while looking at her companion, turning her face towards the light coming from the window and the fluttering curtain. She appears tranquil and composed, accepting her fate, unlike her carer who despairs too much to be able to look at the girl. There is a bottle on the cupboard and a half empty glass on the table. Apart from the girl's hair and the light emanating from the central part of the painting where the girl's feverish face rests against the pillow, the colours are dark and diffused. As

Launer (2021, p.747) observed, the painting's focus is not on objects but on emotions and the 'brush strokes, furrows and thick layers of pigment from which the image is composed' create a powerful image of sadness. As the scene has been sparsely sketched, the painting gives an impression of being unfinished and indeed, Munch (2005, p.184) mentions that 'it remained unfinished after about twenty reworkings.'

Because Munch said, 'I paint what I have seen' (Munch cited in Potter, 2011 p.574) it is widely assumed that *The Sick Child* (1886) depicts a death scene of his sister Sophie, however, Launer (2021) argues that the girl from the painting does not resemble her. Furthermore, he adds that Munch used a model to recreate the scene, what makes it 'both personal and archetypal' (Launer, 2021 p.748). It also remains unknown who is the girl's grieving companion, but it could be assumed that she is either her mother or aunt Karen. It is not unlikely though, that Munch, decided to reunite the most important women of his life, his deceased mother and sister on this meaningful painting. That links this work with the Jungian archetypes among which the images of mother and child are strongly represented. In fact, through the obsessive repetition of working and re-working of the scene from *The Sick Child* (1886) Munch confirms Jung's theory that people with 'mental disturbances or illnesses' can be haunted by certain archetypes and feel the urge to recreate them in a process of autotherapy (Cothren and D'Alleva, 2021 p.128). It cannot, however, be ruled out that by choosing the subject, Munch simply followed a trend popularised by the Pre-Raphaelites, of depicting sick and dying girls, for as Launer (2021, p.748) argues, it bears 'striking similarity' to John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851-52) yet offers 'something far more authentic.' Potter (2011) confirms that painting children on the pillows was popular then and cites Munch who wrote 'it was the period I think of as the age of the pillow.'

Turova (2008, p.48) argues that 'Munch constantly reflected on his moods' and *The Private Journals* (2005) for which sake he created his AlterEgo, a poet called Brandt, indicate that he considered himself an artist and a writer alike. Skryabin et al. (2020, p.573) add that 'philosophy, literature and symbolist poetry played an important role' in his life and work.

There is a possibility then, that he drew the inspiration for *The Sick Child* (1886) from John Keats, a poet who died of tuberculosis at an early age, just like Munch's mother and sister, and explored '[T]he pathos of youth caught between life and death' in his poems (Potter, 2011 p.574). Potter (2011, p.574) also maintains that 'the opposites in life: love and loss, pleasure and pain' were prominent in Keats' poems what links them with Munch's artistic inspirations and individual experiences.

Skryabin et al. (2020) suggest that Munch felt guilty of his own survival and through *The Sick Child* (1886) confronted his feelings of loss and despair while Potter (2011, p.574) argues that through this painting the artist recorded his 'his own response to the death scene' and he portrayed the 'physical and spiritual attractiveness (of the girl) heightened ... by ... illness.' As the artist's mother died when he was a child, it seems natural that he developed a strong bond with his only older sister, Sophie. Losing her means that his two most important attachments with women were too early interrupted and remained unfulfilled, intensifying his Oedipus complex, affecting his creative output, and shaping permanently his attitude towards women (Skryabin et al., 2020 p.577). Significantly, Munch's relationship with his aunt Karen, despite all her support, also ended up abruptly what confirms Skryabin's et al. (2020) opinion that since his mother's and sister's deaths, the artist did not trust women and all his relationships with them became difficult. J. Gill Holland (2005, p.3) maintains that women of Munch's life were painted not only with passion, but also as seen on *The Sick Child* (1886), with pity and sorrow. He loved them, yet he feared them. A little boy in him, abandoned not once but twice by his dearests, never recovered from the blows and even though he sought women, admired, and desired them, he was too anxious to build a lasting relationship.

Skryabin et al. (2020, p.577) points out that several 'of heavily affect-laden paintings' originated from these complicated relations with women. *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) (Fig.2) is one of them and it became a part of the Munch's acclaimed *The Frieze of Life* cycle.

Fig.2 Munch, E. (1899-1900) *The dance of Life* [Oil on canvas] Oslo: National Gallery.
Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edvard_Munch_-_The_dance_of_life_(1899-1900).jpg
[Accessed: 15th April 2024]

The Frieze of Life cycle took Munch thirty years to complete, and it reflects the artist's exploration of universal themes such as love, loss, and death, and while the previous paintings from the cycle focused on them separately, *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) 'encapsulated all three' (McEwen, 2018 p.44). Set in the scenery of Aasgaardstrand in Oslo Fjord where Munch often stayed, the painting depicts summer night dances on the grass at the fjord's shore, with a full moon brightening the scene and reflected in the background's water (Jaster, n.d.). Several couples are dancing energetically in the middle section of the painting, oblivious to the events which develop on the foreground, which is dominated by a sad looking couple, also dancing, however clearly preoccupied exclusively with themselves. Their eyes are interlocked and so are their hands, strands of the woman's red hair stretch out towards the man, and her red dress wraps around his feet. On their left-hand side a young

blond woman is approaching, dressed in white with a light pattern, she is reaching out for a flower growing between her and the couple. On their right-hand side the same woman but visibly aged and dressed in black, bitter, and withdrawn, observes them clasping her hands anxiously.

By the time Munch began the painting, his original style was fully developed and significantly distinct from that of *The Sick Child* (1886) encouraged by his mentor, Christian Krohg who fully supported the young artist's searching for his own style (Potter, 2011). Several years in Paris, where Munch worked under Léon Bonnat and in Berlin, where he joined again the bohemian circles of artists and writers, were artistically and intellectually stimulating. Potter (2011, p.573) argues that he was inspired by 'linear concepts such as those in the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Art Nouveau practitioners' while Gray F. Watson (2024, para.5) adds that 'Munch used line not as decoration but as a vehicle for profound psychological revelation.' Despite using open brushstrokes like the Impressionists, it was 'Gauguin's use of the bounding line what truly impacted his work (Watson, 2024 para.4). All these influences can be traced on *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900), yet it is prominent that the painting is characteristic and true to the unique Munch's style, and to his aim of creating art which is 'personal and profound, stripped down to the existential states of the human soul' (munchmuseet, n.d.).

Watson (2024, para.6) argues that Munch perceived women as 'the other,' relation with whom he 'desperately desired, yet feared because (it could result in) destruction of the creative ego.' At the time of painting *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900), Munch was involved in one of his most complicated relationships, with Mathilde Larsen, called Tulla. The artist maintained that on the painting he depicted himself dancing with his first love, Milly Thaulow and rejecting Tulla, depicted as both, the young and the mature blond ladies, because her possessive affection was a threat to his art (Munch cited in Wood, 1992). McEwen (2018) though, dismisses this explanation as artist's marketing and argues that Munch drew the inspiration from the play of his friend, Danish playwright, Helge Rode *Dansen Gaar* (The

Dance Goes On) sent to him in 1898. Indeed, drama and Teather were close to Munch's heart, and he often exchanged ideas with his friends Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg (Potter, 2011).

The Dance of Life (1899-1900) composition resembles a stage set but is also linear, with the cycle of life represented by the three women at distinct stages of life; virgin, fertile, and menopausal. The phallic shape of the moonlight reflection, red dress, and hair of the central dancer typical for iconographical representations of femme fatal, and the act of dancing which, according with Freud's theory, can be seen as a substitute for a sexual intercourse add to the psychoanalytical reading of the painting, indicating that it is focused on harnessing libido. McEwen (2018) argues that the pattern on the virgin's white dress resembles tails of spermatozoa, and her red cheeks suggest sickness, therefore she represents a sickly body of femme fragile, yet another threat for a healthy man focused on his artistic career. Women of the Victorian era were seen as a source of mental and physical diseases and were 'also accused of spreading syphilis,' a deadly threat at the turn of the centuries, therefore, as McEwen (2018, p.61) maintains, the painting is 'about the allure, danger, and consequence of sex.' Munch, traumatised by mental and physical illnesses affecting his family, lived in fear of getting infected, yet was not able to refrain from relationships with women, what deepened his anxiety and added to his emotional problems. Skryabin et al. (2020, p.577) confirm that 'the image of woman as desired and feared, seductive and destructive, was at the heart of his anxieties.'

McEwen (2018, p.47) points out that *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900), despite personal references, is 'symbolic of womanhood, making it a universal statement' what brings Jungian theory of archetypes to the analysis. As McEwen (2018) argues, the complexities of the archetypes used by Munch in this painting are essential to unlock the significance of its composition, yet they have not been yet fully explored. The artist placed the archetypal couple in the centre, the male anima and the female animus, the maiden/virgin and her opposite, the mother/mature woman depicting the cycle of life and the closeness of death.

Using his own image on the painting can indicate that through the archetype of the Self, Munch represented his true nature, still crashed by unfulfilled love for Milly Thaulow, and through the invisible Shadow, his unconscious mind where he repressed his desires and the need for being loved and cared for.

In conclusion, this paper aimed to examine Edvard Munch's ambivalent attitude towards women looking at two representative paintings, *The Sick Child* (1886) created at the preliminary stages of the artist's career and *The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) painted as a part of the acclaimed cycle *The Frieze of Life*. Two methodologies were used for the critical analysis of both artworks, the biographical methodology examining the external circumstances which informed the artist's style and subjects, and the critical theory of psychoanalysis which focused on how the artist's psyche affected his works. Sigmund Freud's and Carl Jung's theories used for the scope of this study were briefly explained, along with the most momentous events from Munch's biography.

As the analysis of the chosen paintings shows, Munch's personal life and artistic output were deeply influenced by his childhood tragedies, which he attempted to exorcise through the autotherapy of his art. Loss of his mother and sister at an early age fed his Oedipus complex and had a disastrous impact on his relationships with women whom he loved but distrusted, desired but feared, sought but escaped. Munch believed in significance of his talent and either consciously or not, submitted himself into the Freudian process of sublimation, thus turning his craving for love into creative powers. Confirming Jungian theories through the themes of his artworks, he repeatedly pursued archetypal images which haunted his troubled mind.

Comparison of *The Sick Child* (1886) *with The Dance of Life* (1899-1900) proves that despite all experienced difficulties, Edvard Munch succeeded in developing characteristic style, informed by influences from some of the greatest minds and most acclaimed artists, yet unique and withstanding the probe of time.

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