



The Sick Child, Eugene Carrière, 1885.

The Sick Child

Artistic perceptions of mortal illness in children

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A number of artists have explored illness and death in children through works of art titled *The Sick Child*, each an emotionally powerful scene that arouses deep sympathy. As conventions of art evolved, each portrayal reveals an aspect of how people of the time felt about the loss of a child to illness.

Genre art arose as part of the Renaissance in Northern Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries, distinct from the Renaissance in Italy, but equally vigorous. The emergence of Antwerp as the world's center of trade led to the development of a market for art among wealthy burghers and tradesmen accustomed to the rough-and-tumble world of commerce and less concerned with aesthetic conventions.

In the same era, the Reformation challenged whether religious images had any place in art. In contrast to the holy figures in the grand murals of Giotto and Michelangelo, the subjects displayed the daily lives of common folk in familiar settings—work in the fields, a simple meal, and frolicking in a tavern or at a festival. Often portrait-sized and smaller, and finely detailed, the works engaged the viewer, and invited close inspection. Dutch and Flemish painters Pieter Breugel the Elder (1525–1569), and Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675) produced masterpieces of genre art that dominated the field.¹

Genre art

Genre art was well suited for the Realism movement in the latter half of the 19th century, which emerged in mid 19th century France. With a society roiled for more than a half century by revolution, political turmoil, and social unrest, French artist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) declared that he did not paint angels because he had never seen one.² Other artists closely identified with the movement included Jean-Francois Millet (1824–1875), and Honore Daumier (1808–1879).

Genre artists' subjects during the Realism movement were real people living in cities, villages, and on farms. Instead of nudes and figures in robes painted in classic poses and settings, genre art subjects were clothed in the rags of peasants and the urban poor, and the simple dress of the working class. The scenes challenged viewers with uncompromising images of filth, poverty, hunger, disease,



The Sick Child, Gabriël Metsu, circa 1664–1666.
Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain

death, and the desperation of the working poor.³

The sick child was a natural subject for genre art. A subject that evoked sympathy, the sick child presented several artistic challenges. How do you present the child, too young to comprehend religion and the meaning of salvation? How does one show the profound emotions of the mother, full of concern, worry, and ultimately grief?

As genre art developed, other elements of the drama were considered: the doctor, a purported healer with woefully limited abilities; and siblings, innocent onlookers confronted with the imminent death of a playmate, and his/her own mortality.

As art evolved from Realism at the end of the 19th century, Symbolism attempted to express emotions without the settings of genre art. Symbolists considered this shallow and trite. Nineteenth century history art scholar Michelle Facos saw the purpose of the symbolist “as not to educate or describe, but to express ideas truthfully.”³ French artists Odilon Redon (1840–1916) and Gustave Moreau (1850–1926) led the movement, but the best known symbolist painter was Norwegian artist Edvard

The Sick Child

Munch (1863–1944).⁴ These artists' works provide powerful images of the heart-rending emotions that surround a child with mortal illness.

The blessed child

Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667), a popular genre artist in 17th century Amsterdam, was a master painter in the artists' guild by his late teens. His works covered a variety of genre scenes including urban markets, the daily lives of the working class, and his patrons among the urban bourgeoisie. With the portrayal of human emotion and drama, he turned to religious themes in the years preceding his own death at age 38 years. *The Sick Child* (1664–1666), one of his last paintings, shows a listless child limp in his mother's lap. The composition of mother and child evokes Michelangelo's Vatican Pieta, the mother presenting the child's sanctity, suggesting a holy connection.⁵ Metsu's composition reflects the attitude of the time, that children held a special status as being blessed before God.

In the 17th century, any childhood illness carried the threat of death, with one-third of children dying before age 15 years.⁶ Death in early childhood precluded a meaningful religious education and not much of a chance to indulge in sin, therefore the young had a natural holiness conferred on them.

Hannah Newton, a British historian who has studied childhood illness in 17th century England notes, "Children enjoyed a special religious status at this time: they were

thought to be especially beloved by God and capable of extraordinary faith."⁶

The child is an angel in Edward Bird's (1772–1819) *The Sick Child*. He/she rests on a cloud formed by white pillows and wearing a white cap that serves as a halo. The setting is a typical indoor genre scene with walls of dark hewn wood and the figures' clothes and blankets on the bed drab and shabby. An old woman sits vigil at the bedside. The relationship of the old woman to the child is not clear. In her lap is not the child but an open book. This juxtaposition suggests that the sick child had an innate blessedness, as adults require the Bible as a guide to salvation.⁷

Despite the inherent drama of the scene, emotion is not a prominent feature of either work. Metsu shows the mother's concern with a turn of her head, a furrow in her brow, and a bend of her body toward the child. The child is too weak to respond, his limbs slack, his gaze without focus. Bird's child is also drained of energy, mouth slack and eyes closed in a stupor more than sleep. The old woman is an onlooker, disconnected from the child. She keeps watch, but without evidence of love or concern. The figures in both paintings fail to display the deep emotions that are aroused when a cherished child falls mortally ill. Instead, the viewer brings emotionality when viewing the scene.

A mother's care and concern

In the attitude and placement of his figures, Arturo



The Sick Child, Edward Bird, date unknown.
Wolverhampton Art Gallery



El Niño Enfermo, Arturo Michelena, 1882.
Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas, Venezuela

Michelena (1863–1898) introduces more drama in his *L'Enfant Malade* (1882). A sick-room that is squarely a realist scene, the setting is a home that is modest, clean, and bathed in light from an uncovered window. Some religious elements remain: the child is still a holy being, resting on a white cloud, and wearing a compress that serves as a soft halo. However, despite the suggestion of religiosity, there is no overt message of the power of faith, or promise of a child's salvation.

With no religious figure in the painting, the mother looks to a secular authority, the doctor, and seeks reassurance that the child will recover. She is seated protectively on the child's

bed, her body turned away from the viewer and toward her child. Her face in profile shows her sadness and concern. In shadow, behind the head of the bed, the father's intent expression is visible. The physician's stance and central position in the painting reflect his status.

Following symbolist principles in his version of *The Sick Child* (1885), Eugène Carrière (1849–1906) took the mother and child out of the sickroom, and focused on the intensity of maternal love. The artist places the bright triangle of the child directly on top of the dark triangular mass of the mother, who holds the child against her body. The child responds, with just enough strength to press a hand against the mother's face; the other arm hangs limp. Carrière emphasizes the feeling of a mother's love through her slightly pursed lips, as if she were kissing the child's forehead. Like Metsu's mother, her gaze is downcast and her brow slightly furrowed, but her expression reveals her private thoughts of worry and foreboding. The overall theme turns from salvation to protection. The suffering child is reassured that mother will be present, and the mother hopes to shield her child from harm.⁸

The doctor

A sick child provided Samuel Luke Fildes (1843–1927) a chance to portray the most famous doctor in art history in his iconic work *The Doctor* (1891). The doctor's posture conveys full absorption in the fate of the stricken child. His



The Doctor, Sir Luke Fildes, circa 1891. Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain

expression and his hand at his chin convey concern. The spoon in the cup, and the half empty bottle on the table show that he has administered medication, and has done what he can. The darkness of the room and the lamp suggest that he has worked through the night, the daylight visible behind the shuttered window to the right confirms the nightlong watch and suggests hope for the child's recovery. Medical ethicist Y. Michael Barilan observes "the painting [is] an emblem of virtuous and ethical care-giving."⁹

Fildes wanted to honor the medical profession with a figure of dignity, specifically the physician who attended the illness and death of his first son on Christmas Day 1877.⁹ On the threshold of success as one of England's foremost painters, Fildes was able to afford individualized care and attention for his son. He was so impressed with his son's physician that he made the doctor the central figure of his most important commission to that point. The piece was considered a new "English painting of importance" on the occasion of its donation to the art collection of sugar trader Henry Tate, who opened a national gallery that bears his name.⁹

To achieve the drama that he desired in his work, Fildes created a number of fictions, summarized in Barilan's informative article on the artist's life and the painting. Instead of Fildes' own comfortable London home, the setting is a fisherman's shack that the artist happened to explore during a trip to Devon some years before.⁹ The

The Sick Child

doctor's grooming and dress identify him as a consultant physician who would likely charge a princely sum of £30 for an overnight home call of the kind depicted in the work. Barilan notes:

Although all these dignitaries provided free care in voluntary hospitals for the poor, they never called in at their homes. Moreover, they usually did not think it was worth the effort.⁹

The painting suggests with daybreak the child will survive. But the reality was that a sick child faced death no matter what the physician did, as occurred with the artist's child years before. Barilan observes:

The Doctor has a fairy-tale dimension to it: a common child being treated like royalty by an agent of modern magic, the Doctor of Medicine.⁹

But such artistic devices imbue the painting with heroism, as Barilan later notes:

By shifting the sickbed scene from his own affluent house to a country cottage, Fildes follows the pre-modern iconography and hagiography of medical miracles, in which the hero cures a poor child. *The Doctor* is Fildes' only painting where the well off confronts the common.⁹

It is an image from which many physicians receive inspiration.

The sick child

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was a keen observer of extreme emotion. He delved into the child's awareness of mortality in a series of paintings, lithographs, and etchings collectively called *The Sick Child* (multiple versions 1886–1926). Munch was not yet of school age when his mother died, and later, as a teen, the death of Sophie, a favorite sister, devastated him. Munch was consumed by these memories that likely contributed to the themes of grief, loneliness, and despair that haunted his art.⁴

Munch's first painting of *The Sick Child*, completed when he was 23-years-old, was the work that established his reputation. It shows Symbolist principles by blurring details of the sickroom, and focuses on the tranquil expression of the child and the emotional bond between the child and her attendant at the bedside. The bold colors and the nervous energy of the strokes of the child's red hair, as well as the hands, pillow, and surrounding room convey

Munch's strong emotions associated with his sister's death. The child, clearly an adolescent, has a serenity that belies the inherent sadness of the scene. She gazes over the bowed head of an older woman, as if her mind was on a realm beyond death, and not of the living. The woman is the girl's aunt.

In contrast to other renditions of *The Sick Child*, we do not see the woman's face. Her body, while at the bedside, keeps a distance. The girl displays a gesture that suggests offering her hand to kiss, thus introducing an element of religiosity to the scene. The aunt's attitude is supplication more than sorrow. The girl's placid expression assures the viewer that she has accepted her fate.

From her study of diaries of 17th century England, Newton found that parents included children in visits to relatives and friends who were near death. Their explanations were truthful: children died; they might too. Children needed to develop an understanding of death, including their own. She notes, "Making mortality familiar to children, they hoped to take the fear out of the unknown."⁶

As death neared, parents comforted their children by emphasizing faith and salvation. Society was deeply religious during the era, and even children were "preoccupied with the Christian doctrine of salvation."⁶ Often, children



The Sick Child, Edvard Munch, multiple versions 1886–1926. Kunstmuseum

accepted their own deaths, with some expressing joy at the prospect of death and the opportunity to join deceased parents and siblings in Heaven.

Today, the approach to the emotional support of families with dying children is more secular. Elizabeth Whittam, a nurse who works closely with children with cancer, and their families, at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, notes the difficulty in discussing death with children, and the impulse to protect them from the tragic end they face. Professionals who work with dying children see them develop an awareness of their illness. Often, they know of their fatal prognosis even when it is deliberately kept from them by their parents and doctors. They become concerned with the well-being of their parents and those close to them. Dying children may not overtly express fear and anxiety. Such feelings certainly will develop and deserve honest communication that will help both child and family.¹⁰



Death in the Sickroom, Edvard Munch, 1895. Kunstmuseum

Children, like adults, are concerned that they will be comfortable, safe, and not alone. They should always be assured that they will not be abandoned emotionally or physically.¹⁰

The healthy sibling

Michelena's painting has a figure not seen in most versions of *The Sick Child*: a little girl stands in shadow, to the right side of the painting, separate from the drama.

She has a stare that troubles the viewer. She knows what is going on, yet makes the viewer wonder how her brother's struggle is affecting her young mind.

Children who visit dying family members often do not receive words of explanation and comfort. Parents, absorbed in grief, are often too overwhelmed to address the worry and grief of a surviving child. Adults often decide to shield children from uncomfortable topics such as death, grief, loss, and suffering. Clancy Martin, professor of philosophy at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, says, "Deception and self-deception, particularly powerful forces when dealing with the death of children, further complicate our ability to know and tell the truth."¹¹

In a 2015 study, 70 percent of siblings of children dying of cancer observed their brother's or sister's suffering during the terminal stages of his/her illness. Despite their proximity, the surviving children reported poor communication and lack of knowledge about the event.¹² And a 2005 survey noted that surviving siblings experienced strong feelings of loneliness, anxiety, anger, and jealousy for years after their sibling's death.¹³

Ensuring that children develop mature levels of understanding requires a considerable amount of engagement with parents and caregivers. The dissatisfaction and possibly negative memories of surviving children might be reduced if information and support are continuously supplied.¹³ Pediatric palliative care specialists provide compassionate and honest discussions of death, and acknowledge siblings' unique reactions to a child's death.¹⁰

It can be inferred that Munch did not receive the benefit of such candid and sustained engagement during the deaths of his mother and sister. Despite the calm demeanor of the girl in his *The Sick Child*, the artwork has a jitteriness that reflects an unsettled emotional state.

In a later work by Munch, *Death in the Sickroom* (1895), all family members are turned away, with no connection to the terminally ill sister, in the background, seen only behind the back of the chair.

The overwhelming grief of the surviving child is shown in Munch's *The Dead Mother and the Child* (painting 1897–1899; etching 1901). The surviving child, now in the foreground, faces the viewer, the dead mother in bed immediately behind. The child brings her hands to each side of her contorted face, a gesture of agonized grief that recalls Munch's most famous work, *The Scream* (1893–1910).¹⁴



The Dead Mother and the Child, Edvard Munch, circa 1897–1899.
Kunstmuseum

Unrestrained grief

The sick child theme devolves into *Woman with Dead Child* (1903) by Kathe Kollwitz (1867–1945). Seated cross legged, a naked woman envelops a dead child in her arms. She buries her face into his body, her dishevelled hair and muscular arms and legs expressing her anguish.

So striking was the image that one of Kollwitz's friends was concerned that tragedy had befallen the artist, but it hadn't. However, the artist and mother understood the depth of a parent's love for his/her child, and the grief that is felt if the child dies. In a cruel coda to the work, the artist's son Peter, who served as the model for the work when he was young, died in battle as a soldier in World War I. And, Peter's son, the artist's grandson, died in battle in World War II.¹⁵

The depth of a mother's loss recalls lines from the movie version of Tennessee Williams's play, *Suddenly Last Summer* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, Columbia Pictures, 1959). Reflecting on the painful memory of the death of her beloved son, matriarch Mrs. Violet Venable says:

A malady of living. After all, I buried a husband and a son, I'm a widow and a...[She pauses and looks off into the distance] Funny, there's no word. Lose your parents, you're an orphan. Lose your only son, and you are...[she pauses as sadness comes over her face like a shadow] Nothing.¹⁶

Many artists have brought their experiences and world-views to their work, and many had experienced the death of a child, sibling and/or parent. Their feelings emerge in their paintings: religious hope for recovery or salvation; worry and concern during long nights at a bedside; and despair. Guided by the artistic principles of their time,

each expressed the profound and timeless love parents have for their child.

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