



Henry Peach Robinson's "Fading away": a learning resource for narrative of illness

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Abstract

"Fading Away", the combination photograph by Henry Peach Robinson, has been critically reviewed by many authors in the past. This article attempts to interpret it using an imaginative process. The objective is to examine how Fading Away can be used as a learning resource for a 'Narrative of illness' session in a medical humanities class in undergraduate medical education. The authors demonstrate that the combination photograph could be used to explain how the coping concept is different for a dying patient. Depressive cognition, or in other words - coping in isolation - could lead to a strategy of visual rumination that can influence the dying patient to adopt a self-reflective style in dealing with death. It could be argued that this reasoning neatly corresponds with Kubler-Ross's well-known model of the five stages of grief that most patients go through upon facing death - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It explains how dying patients can adopt a strategy and style of temporal travel of mind to relive the past and 'prelive' the future that they will never get to see.

Keywords: Art history; Bereavement; End of life; Kubler-Ross; Narrative medicine; Medical humanities; Medicine in the arts

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Figure: Fading away – taken in 1857 by Henry Peach Robinson - it was printed from five negatives and it shows a young girl dying of tuberculosis.

Source: <https://www.slideshare.net/markellis923171/henry-peach-robinson-pioneer-victorian-photographer>

Introduction

The combination photograph by Henry Peach Robinson named, “Fading Away” (circa 1858) is a picture composed from five negatives and depicts the suffering that ensues when a subject is dying of consumption (Figure). The disease of tuberculosis, called consumption in that era, was responsible for millions of human deaths since there was no treatment for infected patients.[1] The term consumption underlined the marked weight loss of the infected individual.

Although the photo’s literal statement is that it depicts the dying of a young girl while she is surrounded by her family,[2] from a medical perspective it can be interpreted in many different ways. This article looks at Robinson’s combination photograph and interprets it using an imaginative process and clinical observation. The objective is to examine the photograph for its potential as a

learning resource for a ‘Narrative of illness’ session in a medical humanities class in undergraduate medical education.

Fading Away and its relevance to death and dying

Peach’s famous photograph depicted the death of a young girl surrounded by her family, presumably in a proverbial state of sadness.[2] Representation of people watching family members die go back many centuries in Western art. In today’s industrialized society, dying takes place mostly in hospitals, devoid of any significant family interactions. Death is highly sanitized, and most people are detached from the harsh reality of mortality. However, this is a very recent development, and for most of humanity’s existence, dying has been an emotive and intense moment of family life. The Medieval Book of Hours was a detailed etiquette text to instruct Christians how to behave when someone was on their

deathbed.[3] Significant works of art, such as Bosch's Death of the Reprobate, were opportunities to express deep feelings about the meaning of existence, and its finitude in the face of death. Existentialist philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger further reflected on the experience of dying, and its implications on how we should live.[4] Fading Away belongs to a posterior period (19th Century) and is a continuation of that tendency.

Fading Away - contribution to the role of tuberculosis in art

It is relevant to take into consideration the role of tuberculosis in art. This photographic work dates to 1858. During that time, Romanticism as a literary and artistic movement was in full swing in Europe and North America.

Romanticism was known to have a complicated relationship with tuberculosis. On the one hand, it was understood that tuberculosis was a terrible disease that decimated populations and left a disturbing impression on those who witnessed it; however, Romantics found something mysterious yet fascinating about this disease.[5,6] For instance, when John Keats was 14-years old, his mother died of consumption. Years later, his youngest brother, Thomas, contracted the disease and it was while caring for Thomas that John Keats likely contracted consumption.[5] He initially studied medicine; however, during his time as a medical student, he became increasingly ambivalent towards medicine and instead began to devote much of his time to writing. His medical training and his experience in caring for, and watching as his mother and brother died of consumption, did not prevent him from repeatedly mentioning death and romanticizing consumption in at least three of his odes.

As Martinez, 2011 observes in his thesis, "Keats repeatedly holds on to the image of the beauty that can be found in death. This image holds with many of the English Romantics, who used the disease to shape the literature and poetry of the time".[6] Fading Away is yet another contribution to this trend in the history of Western art.

Fading Away as a learning resource for "narrative of illness"

Anderson and Evans (2015) have discussed how depressed individuals demonstrate a number of biases in their ability to retrieve past events and simulate future events.[7] In their study, dysphoric individuals saw future events as less vivid, coherent, sensorially detailed, bodily experienced, emotionally intense and important with respect to their life story and identity. Research by Burwell and Shirk (2007) has indicated that rumination contributes to the maintenance or intensification of depressive symptoms among adults.[8] They report that brooding is related to maladaptive disengagement coping strategies, whereas reflection is related to adaptive primary and secondary coping strategies.

Applying this learning to Peach's photograph, especially considering that it is an overlay of five different negatives, the authors of this article take the liberty to interpret the combination photography as the patient's hallucination, depicting the patient's past, present and future - a hallucination caused by the diminished state of the dying girl. One must keep in mind here that reports explain how hallucinations can occur when the tuberculosis has reached the CNS and they are secondary to structural damage.[9,10]

The following interpretations are the opinions of the authors as observers and

are directed by a clinical sense of psychology and of medicine.

The two other figures that are standing by the bed could depict the dying, hallucinating girl's self-reflections. The older lady at the foot of the bed can be construed as the patient's future and may be a look into her future self, one that is not going to happen because it is being taken away from her by the illness. In other words, as she lies in the bed suffering from consumption, she is foreshadowing what her future could have been - it allows the dying girl to experience the non-existent, as described by Stappers and Flach, 2014.[11] The older, future self is sitting further away from the dying young girl, indicating that her life might have taken a farther journey if not for the illness. The older figure is also seated at the eye level of the girl in bed. This may be interpreted as clarity and another form of foreshadowing of what was to come in her life if not shortened by tuberculosis.

The individual standing at the head of the bed can be inferred as the dying girl's past, a temporal mind travel resulting from insight, internal self-awareness and self-reflection as described by Harrington and Loffredo, 2010.[12] It can be seen that she appears to be of a healthy weight and complexion - as the girl must have been before she fell sick with consumption. This figure's position, at the head of the bed, suggests that the patient's past is behind her. She is looking down at the patient as though looking at her sick self from a higher state of medical wellness and of "what was" when she was not in a deathly ill state.

The man standing in the background is a dark figure who may also be a hallucination and may represent a father, a grandfather or a husband. As the figure

is only shown from the back, the face is not visible and therefore we cannot guess at the age or status of the individual. The placement of him in the background and in the middle of the picture, as compared to the foreground and ends of the bed with the other figures, may indicate that he is a figure who is important to the patient. As he is not distinct, perhaps he is the future figure's husband, something that may not come to be considering that she is in bed in the present time, and is dying. The man could also be a hallucination depicting the patient's past - maybe she remembers a time when she was better and was doted on by her father. It may also be that the father figure is himself reflecting on the patient's future - standing at the window gazing outwards, he is possibly looking towards a future that is not achievable.

[Fading Away and the narrative of chronic illnesses](#)

There are three concepts applied to the narrative of chronic illnesses - coping, strategy and style.[13] "Coping" refers to cognitive processes; "strategy", to the actions people take; and "style", to the way people respond. Our interpretation throws light on how the 'coping' concept is different for a dying patient. The combination photograph could be used to explain how a dying patient's experience of depressive cognition, or in other words - 'coping' in isolation - could lead to a 'strategy' of visual rumination that can influence the dying patient to adopt a self-reflective 'style' in dealing with death.

[Fading Away and Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief](#)

It could be argued that the photograph neatly corresponds to Kubler-Ross's well-known model of the five stages of grief that most patients go through upon facing death. These are: denial, anger,

bargaining, depression and acceptance.[14]

In the denial stage, the affected person is not living in 'actual reality,' rather, he/she is living in a 'preferable' reality. That is to say, there is a strong tendency to 'prelive' a future of preference. Thus, the interpretation of the older lady at the foot of the bed as the patient's future and a look into her future self, may be justified in the context of Ross's denial stage.

The second stage is anger where one finds it incomprehensible how 'something like this could happen to me' and this stage then progresses to the third stage that is bargaining. Bargaining involves promises of better behavior or significant life changes which will be made in exchange for the reversal of the loss. It is during anger and bargaining that the affected individual has a tendency to relive the past - initially (in the anger stage) question why good things done in the past have gone unnoticed and why an undeserved punishment is to be faced; eventually (in the bargaining stage) accept the wrongs done in the past and promise to the higher self that if given a second chance, the wrongs of the past shall be undone.

When it dawns on the affected individual that anger and bargaining are not going to reverse the loss, the person may sink

into the stage of depression, where he/she confronts the inevitability and reality of the loss and a sense of one's own helplessness to change it. Finally comes the acceptance that the change cannot be undone (in this case, the inevitability of death due to consumption).

In the photograph, based on the interpretation provided above, the patient has ultimately accepted her fate. As a complement, studies of near-death experiences report that people undergoing them, apart from the usual traveling through a tunnel with light at the end of it, revisit their past experiences and contemplate the great milestones of their lives.[15]

Conclusion

The authors' imaginative interpretation of Peach's photograph - *Fading Away* - explains how dying patients can adopt a strategy and style of temporal travel of mind to relive the past and 'prelive' the future that they will never get to see. It allows a discussion of Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief that most patients go through upon facing death - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The interpretation demonstrates that the photograph could be useful as a learning resource in a medical humanities class in undergraduate medical education.

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