



A holistic approach to Henry Peach Robinson's 'Fading Away' for a medical humanities class

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Abstract

In medical humanities, Henry Peach Robinson's combination photograph 'Fading away' can be interpreted either through a reductionist approach or a holistic approach. He perfected this fictional photograph through five negatives to create an anecdote encompassing a profound issue prevalent in the Victorian era at the time – attitudes towards tuberculosis. While there are many interpretations of this piece of art from a reductionistic approach – literary, artistic, humanistic, or illness-narrative – there are hardly any interpretations from a holistic perspective integrating all these angles. When used during a medical humanities course, the photograph provoked students to think beyond the purely artistic or the purely medical aspects of disease. Some of the messages that medical students took home were: 'grief could be experienced by anyone'; 'love expands into diverse manifestations during times of sadness'; 'sometimes you do not know the answer to everything and hence medicine has its limits'; 'no matter which walk of life you are from, disease knows not status, wealth, poverty or prestige'; 'we must empathize with others and what they may go through because whether it be in the future or past, we too will one day experience what they do in some form during our lifetimes'. This paper reports on our attempt to adopt a holistic approach to analyze the photograph, initially from Robinson's perspective, and later, with respect to modern medicine.

Keywords: Empathy; Fading Away; Henry Peach Robinson; Holistic Approach; Illness Narrative; Medical humanities

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Fading Away (1858) by Henry Peach Robinson (British, Ludlow, Shropshire 1830–1901 Tunbridge Wells, Kent).

Medium: Albumen silver print from glass negatives.

Credit Line: The Royal Photographic Society at the National Media Museum, Bradford, UK.

Picture courtesy: Fineman, Mia. Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012. no. 16, pp. 26, 209.

Introduction

Robinson was an English photographer who lived from 1830-1901. While he attempted his hand at painting, which was considered a 'safer', non-controversial art, photography was his true muse. He was known to be part of the "Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood", which implied that he was seeking to depict literal realism in his photography.[1] His most controversial work, titled 'Fading Away' (Picture; created in 1858), exhibits just that.[2] Robinson perfected this fictional photograph through a combination of five negatives to create an anecdote encompassing a profound issue prevalent in the Victorian era. 'Fading Away' depicts a young woman suffering from consumption (presently known as tuberculosis); she is shown surrounded by loved ones, while, in the literal sense, she fades away.

The Victorian public was not accepting of the image initially, as the concept of photography was considered "too real" to depict issues such as the painful departure of the young girl. Conversely, painting as an art form was popular, as it romanticized the mundane of everyday life and idealized fantasy over reality. So, it was not until Robinson's photograph caught the eye of Prince Albert that Robinson's reputation spiked.[1] Robinson utilized this new art form - "fictional photography" - to convey the devastation of tuberculosis and create drawback because without such unease and vexation, tuberculosis would not gain the recognition and awareness it so desperately deserved. He believed that the starkness of realism in the face of prudish Victorian values would demolish the stigma surrounding 'consumption'.

In an earlier paper, we shed light on the utility of this combination photograph, 'Fading Away', as a learning resource for a Narrative of Illness session in medical humanities.[3] Other authors have also interpreted the photograph from literary and artistic perspectives.[1,4] In this paper, we ascend to a holistic approach to discuss the same piece of art, and attempt to illustrate how a 'big picture' approach is equally resourceful for learning in medical humanities. A brief description of how this photograph is used regularly in a medical humanities session to train prospective doctors to reflect on the narrative of illness is also given.

Historical background to 'Fading Away'

Victorian society and art

The first notable factor in Robinson's art would have to be the society he lived in. The majority of individuals of Victorian society were thought to be prudish, hypocritical, stuffy and narrow minded, while Queen Victoria was known to try and improve basic life by signing acts such as the Health Act in 1875.[5] This is highly noteworthy because as a resident of the town of Ludlow under Queen Victoria's reign, Robinson was in the midst of Victorian society and all that it entailed.[1,5,6] In a society where the ruler was progressive and open minded yet the public was not, Robinson became someone who straddled both worlds.

The Pre-Raphaelites and art

It is significant to note that Robinson and most photographers were heavily influenced by a group of painters known as the Pre-Raphaelites - painters who sought to show realness and truth in their work rather than myths.[1,7] This information is helpful in recognizing what influenced Robinson's work and why he created 'Fading Away'. While viewers interpret the photograph from their point

of view, it is intriguing to speculate on Robinson's perspective. It is possible that each figure in the photograph holds value and a relationship with the dying patient. Rather than dissecting each figure separately, it is viewed as a whole. Through this approach, the photograph tells the story of the many people suffering due to tuberculosis behind closed doors. This style of art nods at more realistic techniques because rather than idealistic, heroic and godly paintings the Victorians may have been exposed to, the public was now unsheltered from informative and blunt, near-realities.[7]

Making connections

Photography & Medicine

Since photographs are stills captured in real time, with real people and in real settings, it is understandable why the public of the time believed photographs to be real and authentic. Robinson was innovative in his craft - he took a real form of art and manipulated it so that it became fictional.[2] It could be called the earliest form of Photoshop; however, instead of conveying unrealistic beauty trends, it was used to portray the harsh realities of people suffering from tuberculosis and their loved ones.

Photography - recently introduced as an art form at the time - was still quite new to the general public. Linking the newness of photography to the taboo that surrounded 'consumption' was the perfect recipe for controversy. The association may not have been coincidental. It seems that Robinson stumbled upon photography by chance, but then he used it to create awareness (specifically about tuberculosis) deliberately. It is said that bad publicity is still publicity and Robinson exploited the adage. Through his art, he exposed Victorian society not only to unbelievable artistic concepts, but also to the health needs of the public that was plagued by 'consumption'. [4]

'Fading away' and medical understanding – from mystery to awareness

When Robinson chose to integrate the medical concept of tuberculosis into his artwork, society's concept of the disease was challenged. Medicine and disease were not well understood - the Shakespearean influence of the time meant that people tended to romanticize the disease despite the fact that it ended in death. The consequence of tuberculosis on the body was akin to those desired by many in the quest of beauty – the thin, transparent skin, rosy cheeks, red lips, and bright eyes – and society drastically misinterpreted the severity of accompanying symptoms such as weight loss and fever.[8]

Because the physical manifestations of the disease were interpreted as beauty, tuberculosis was considered an ideal form of death. Societal concepts of illness were rooted in the abstract and the mystical, which was socially acceptable at the time.[9] Robinson's 'Fading Away' - grounded in realism - challenged the Victorian perception of tuberculosis and provoked society to recognize an alternative to the filtered and rosy dialogue that was culturally accepted.

Nevertheless, controversy ensued when Robinson admitted that the poor dying girl was, in fact, a healthy fourteen year old model who had managed so well as to make death appear real. The apex of Robinson's work occurred when Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria purchased this photograph and requested to receive a copy of every one of Robinson's work after that.[1] This was the highest honor anybody could have received - having their art purchased and accepted by the reigning Queen's husband amidst so much controversy. Now that this photograph had the support of the royal family, the public could no longer deny that tuberculosis

was real, even if the photograph was not. Death affected everyone, whether it was photographed or not; and finally the public had no choice but to digest these facts and to become aware of the deadliness of the disease.[10]

Critical analysis

Use of the photograph in a medical humanities class

The medical humanities constitute a regular teaching-learning module at Xavier University School of Medicine, Aruba. Although it was being taught much earlier in isolated, stand-alone sessions, the medical humanities as a course in itself was structured and built into the curriculum in 2017. It is taught to medical students across all semesters during the first two years of basic science training that precedes the phase of clinical training. History of medicine, doctor-patient interaction, narrative of illness, aging, end-of-life care, and death and dying constitute significant chapters of learning throughout the semesters.

The module is particularly extensive in year-1. During this time, each session runs for two hours and involves small group discussions and interaction among medical students and a faculty coordinator. 'Fading Away' is used as a learning resource when 'Narrative of illness' is the curricular topic. Students are divided into small groups, and are asked to reflect on the details of the photograph from a patient perspective, the family's perspective and a doctor's perspective. Each group is then asked to present their reflections to the entire class. Triggers are given to the groups to prompt reflection: interpret the photograph in terms of each character depicted; what is the mood of the young versus old characters in the photograph?; what is the mood of the male versus the female characters?; who forms the central figure in the photograph and why?

Some of the reflections pertaining to 'reliving the past' and 'preliving a future that the dying person will never get to see' have been shared in an earlier paper.[3] For the purpose of the current paper, we include unique observations that came out of discussions with the small group that included the first two authors of this paper.

The learners noticed that Robinson had photographed in black and white (color photography did not appear until much later in history) and they felt that the tones helped in interpreting the characters. The young girl dying of consumption appeared to be the focal point of the photograph because she was dressed in white while every other figure was dressed in darker, muted colors. They thought the symbolism of the color white could be associated with the fact that she was quite young - youth is often associated with innocence, purity and chastity. Her cherub-like face and her braided hair also suggested youth. Furthermore, white is heavily associated with death, funerals, and religion - the girl was probably photographed in white because she was close to death at an age of purity and innocence; it was as though she were an angel ascending to heaven.

The older female figure seated directly across the patient is dressed in darker clothing, with her head covered with a scarf. The fabrics and colors she wears appear to be tasteful and luxe, suggesting her maturity. She is seated with her hands resting in her lap and a concerned but calm expression on her face. All these factors would deem this character likely to be the grandmother or mother of the young girl. Her calm, concerned authority is exhibited in a nurturing manner that are often seen in maternal figures. The other, younger looking woman is seen putting a pillow underneath the dying girl's head. This

woman is dressed more shabbily than the one who is seated. She is also the only figure in the photograph actively doing something - maybe she is the help who is being paid to take care of this young woman and is simply doing her job. She could also be a family member, perhaps a mother who is taking care of her loved one. Whoever she is, she is the only figure in direct contact with the dying girl and is working to provide some sort of comfort while every other figure is a bystander.

The darkest figure in this photograph is the only man displayed. He has his back turned to the photographer and to every other figure in the photograph. He seems to be the least hopeful person of those affected by the girl's condition. By turning his back to her, it is almost as if he is giving up on her recovery, and life returning to normal for everyone. He is looking out of a window which shows somber clouds that probably represent the pathetic state of the current situation. Some students felt this man could be the young girl's significant other, or perhaps a father figure. Even with his back turned, he has great significance in this photograph because his body language is of one who holds the most power.

While the above views were expressed by one group of students that included the first two authors of this paper, there were powerful points put forth by presenters of other groups and these points have been compiled below.

Relevant take-home messages

One view expressed by a group was that the title 'Fading Away' is significant in that it effectively portrays how a person dying of tuberculosis is slowly fading away. Her face is drooping; her hand seemed to have held a book which has dropped down to the little stool on her left; the thick, dark cloth which was

probably draped on her has been pushed below, near her feet, as if it were a burden no longer tolerable and she seems to be fading away from every aspect in the photograph.

Other comments presented were that grief can be experienced by anyone, regardless of age or gender, and individuals have their own way of expressing it - by looking strong and calm, or turning away the face because it is too much to bear; that there are different kinds of love during a time of sadness - the love of a family member, the love of the help, and the desolation of a lover; that this photograph conveys the message that sometimes you do not know the answer to everything. Medicine has its limits, diseases take lives, and loved ones become desolate but that does not mean that the public should give up hope. In fact, if people are aware of these facts, progress can be made in challenging the limitations of medicine. Furthermore, this photograph shows that no matter which walk of life you are from, disease knows not of status, wealth, poverty or prestige. Death is something not only every human but every living being can relate to.

The final take home message at the end of the medical humanities session was that we are all human. Our emotions can be quite similar; we have all experienced sadness, grief, happiness and satisfaction at some point or another in our lives. With this knowledge, we must empathize with others and what they go through because we too have experienced or will

one day experience what they have done.

Conclusion

Robinson redefined the status quo by portraying realism. His photographs were everyday stories, simply hidden in plain sight due to cultural bias, and then deemed unacceptable. Tuberculosis was an endemic problem and rather than speaking about it, Robinson photographed what could not be verbalized. Although his photograph is about tuberculosis, the moods, feelings and messages extracted from this photograph can be applied to any severe disease. Along with the Queen and her advocacy for a better life, as well as education and health for all, Robinson - knowingly or unknowingly - joined this movement. The realness of the photograph, the anguish and the melancholy is undeniable and it captured the attention of the most influential people of that era. The purchasing of this photograph by Prince Albert may have laid down the framework for the Public Health Act that would be signed a decade later. Without this photograph, Robinson would not have been able to cause the uncomfortable controversy that would lead his work into the hands of a royal, thus gaining awareness. The power of the photograph is such that even in the modern age, it can be used as a learning resource in a medical humanities class for prospective doctors to get sensitized to the difference between how a doctor views a disease and how a patient or the patient's family member views illness.

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