

# Evening by Edvard Munch. Towards an image of melancholy

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Fig. 1  
Edvard Munch  
*Evening*, 1888  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

“A girl with a large, purple face under a yellow straw hat sitting on a blue lawn in front of a white house. The whole thing is so indescribably bad in every respect that it is almost comical.”<sup>1</sup>

These were the terms in which the critic of the *Aftenposten* described Munch’s painting *Evening*, exhibited to the public for the first time at the Autumn Salon in Oslo (then Kristiania) in 1888. Munch had painted the work that summer as one of a series in which the principal motifs were his sisters Inger and Laura (figs. 1, 2, 3, 6). Reactions were varied. In contrast to the *Aftenposten*’s critic, others appreciated the shift in direction evident in the artist’s work. Andreas Aubert, a follower of Munch and a critic on the progressive newspaper *Dagbladet*, acknowledged the painter’s talents in his article of December 1888 and noted that Munch had reached a critical phase in his career.<sup>2</sup> Aubert specifically referred to the tension between the artist’s use of colours, which was close to Symbolism, and the still realist settings in his works. Munch maintained close links with naturalism and began to use the Impressionist technique, experimenting with both trends and ultimately surpassing them to become the pioneering Symbolist artist in Norway and a forerunner of Expressionism.

*Evening* (1888) is particularly interesting as it represents the period when Munch began to develop his most characteristic style and subject matter, including that of melancholy, making this painting a testing ground for his ideas. Among the pictorial aspects that Munch was investigating was that of the relationship between the figures and the landscape,<sup>3</sup> whose interaction represented a formal and visual problem for Manet and his Norwegian followers, but which, in the case of Munch, affected the content of the work due to the emotional link between landscape and figure. This is the case with the strange placement of the figure of the young woman, seated in the foreground but offset to the far left, with her lower limbs and back truncated by the frame. In the case of artists such as Degas, compositional arrangements of this sort (inspired by Japanese prints) were associated with movement and a sense of the transient. As used by Munch, however, the result was to turn his solid, introspective figures into visual walls against which the viewer collides. These elements and their arrangement in the composition may have been inspired by the work of the French painters to which Munch had access, but they could also derive from the northern European Romantic tradition that some of Munch’s fellow artists were rediscovering at that period. Seen in a Neo-Romantic context, the figures reveal a contemplative attitude towards nature (fig. 4), giving Impressionist compositional formats a different significance and allowing Munch to develop them to the point of formulating his particular Symbolist idiom.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2  
Edvard Munch  
*Inger in the Sun*, 1888  
Bergen Kunstmuseum (Rasmus Meyers Samlinger), Bergen

Fig. 3  
Edvard Munch  
*Summer Night*, 1889  
Bergen Kunstmuseum (Rasmus Meyers Samlinger), Bergen



Fig. 4  
Eilif Peterssen  
*Evening at Sandø*, 1884-1894  
Private collection



Fig. 5  
Detail of the centre of *Evening* (fig. 1)  
using infra-red photography

Fig. 6  
Edvard Munch  
*Laura and Inger in the Summer Sun*, 1888  
Private collection

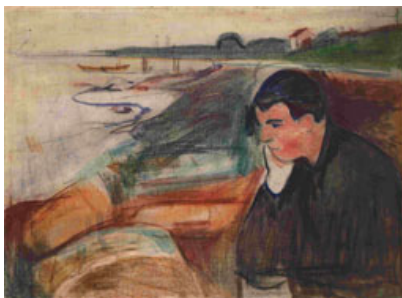


Fig. 7  
Edvard Munch  
*Evening. Melancholy*, 1891  
Munch-museet, Oslo

As a transitional work *Evening* prefigures these ideas in a tentative manner. At this period Munch repainted at least one out of ten of his canvases, as x-rays have revealed.<sup>5</sup> In the case of *Evening* two figures have been eliminated, one on the steps leading up to the house and another, a larger one, in the centre of the composition. The latter figure, which is visible to the naked eye and can be seen in detail in an infra-red photograph (fig. 5), is notably similar to the figure in another composition painted that summer (fig. 6). By removing this large figure from the centre, the composition becomes slightly unbalanced. The viewer's attention shifts towards the monumental figure of Laura, located in the corner away from the central axis where the vanishing point is located and where the principal motif of the painting would normally be found. This odd element in the painting co-exists with another more traditional one with which the figure of Laura seems to have no relation, namely the two figures pulling a boat onto the shore who constitute a scene that could be described as a genre motif.<sup>6</sup> The presence of apparently unconnected, independent scenes in Munch's paintings has been related to the state of mind of the principal figures. This is particularly evident in *Melancholy* of 1891 (fig. 7), in which the identification of the figures, who were friends of the artist, has made it possible to associate the anguish of the foreground figure with the lovers depicted in the background, given that there had been an amorous relationship between the three of them whose termination resulted in the melancholy or jealousy depicted by the artist. Jay A. Clarke has also suggested this idea in relation to *Evening*, in which the background scene would function as a reflection of or trigger for Laura's state of mind.<sup>7</sup>

In common with much of Munch's work, *Evening* is difficult to locate within any specific genre. Is it a landscape, a portrait, a genre scene, all these combined, or none of them? The painting's title may cast light on the painter's intentions, but in itself it raises further questions. *Evening* (1888) was also known as *The Yellow Hat*,<sup>8</sup> *Portrait (Sister with Yellow Hat)*,<sup>9</sup> and *Sister Laura*.<sup>10</sup> Munch was not particularly rigorous with the titles that he gave his works and would leave this task to others or changed the titles on repeated occasions.<sup>11</sup> This may be because he did not formulate the subject of the painting prior to its execution in order for the images to work for themselves, without any narrative support. Such a possibility was suggested by the artist himself in the annotations that he started to write in 1888 and which would be fully articulated in his text *Frieze of Life*.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of *Evening* within Munch's oeuvre lies precisely in the fact that it leads on to the major concepts and themes that characterise his work. The painting can be considered the first in which the artist represented melancholy, a subject that would become a constantly recurring motif, together with love, death and angst.



Fig. 8  
Edvard Munch  
*The Scream*, 1893  
Nasjonalmuseet for kunst,  
arkitektur og design, Oslo

His repeated use of the same concepts has made it difficult to identify some works due to the lack of precise descriptions. *Evening*, for example, may refer to various works of 1888, 1889 (fig. 3) and 1891 (fig. 7). The association with melancholy is established through the particular time of day depicted in the painting and by Laura's expression. Even more significant, however, is the clear link between this painting and subsequent works that constitute the corpus of Munch's images based on this particular emotion. *Melancholy* (1891) (fig. 7) was initially entitled *Evening* (as well as *Jealousy and The yellow Boat*) and its composition is a refinement of the present painting, albeit turned the opposite way. The isolation of the foreground figure, this time located in the right-hand corner, the undulating coastline and the background scene repeat the composition of *Evening*.

Between *Evening* of 1888 and *Melancholy* of 1891 Munch's way of depicting the landscape became more abstracted in order to emphasise its expressivity. This transformation, which could be associated with the projection of the figures' emotions onto the scene, endowed the landscape with a symbolic function. As Gerd Woll suggested in the catalogue raisonné of the artist's work,<sup>13</sup> it may be legitimate to speak of the creation of psychological settings. In the case of *Evening* of 1888, some areas, in particular the house, are painted in considerable detail and thus indicate Munch's continuing links with naturalism. In *Melancholy* of 1891, however, the landscape is reduced to powerful lines of intense colours that contrast with each other and are seemingly dependent on the pensive figure that dominates the scene. This approach led Munch's friend Christian Krogh, a well-known realist painter, to consider *Melancholy* (1891) the first Symbolist painting by a Norwegian artist. The composition, tried out for the first time in *Evening*, would be refined and repeated in further works by Munch. In the first version of *The Scream* of 1893 (fig. 8), an image that has now become one of the great 20th-century icons, Munch took this composition to its furthest point, just five years after he painted *Evening*.

## Notes

- 1 In *Aftenposten*. 5 October 1888, no. 604, p. 1.
- 2 Andreas Aubert: "Tilbageblik paa Hostudstillingen. III". In *Dagbladet*. 10 December 1888. See Nils Messel: "Edvard Munch and his Critics in the 1880s". In Ingeborg Ydstie and Mai Britt Guleng: *Munch becoming "Munch"*. [exhib. cat.] Oslo, Munch Museet, 2008, p. 170.
- 3 Otto Benesch: *Edvard Munch*. London, Phaidon, 1960, p. 7.
- 4 Jay A. Clarke: "Munch's Anxiety of Influence". In Jay A. Clarke: *Becoming Edvard Munch. Influence, Anxiety, and Myth*. [exh. cat.] Chicago, The Art Institute of Chicago - New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 14.
- 5 Dieter Buchhart (ed.): *Edvard Munch. Signs of Modern Art*. [exh. cat. Riehen (Basel), Fondation Beyeler - Schwäbisch Hall, Kunsthalle Würth]. Riehen (Basel), Fondation Beyeler-Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2007, p. 43.
- 6 Götz Czymbek: "Edvard Munchs Weg zur symbolistisches Landschaft". In Czymbek, Götz... [et al.]: *Landschaft als Kosmos der Seele: Malerei des nordischen Symbolismus bis Munch, 1880 - 1910*. [exh. cat. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum]. Heidelberg, Edition Braus, 1998, p. 71.
- 7 Clarke, op. cit., p. 12.
- 8 See the exhibitions *Edvard Munch*. Oslo, Nasjonalgalleriet, 1927, no. cat. 32; and *Edvard Munch*. Berlin, Nationalgalerie, 1927, no. cat. 16.
- 9 See the exhibition *Edvard Munch. Høstutstillingen gjennom de første 25 år 1882-1907*. Oslo, Kunstnerens Hus, 1932, cat. no. 199.
- 10 See the monograph by Josef Paul Hodin: *Edvard Munch*. London, Thames and Hudson, 1972.
- 11 Sue Prideaux: *Edvard Munch. Behind the Scream*. New Haven - London, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 91.
- 12 Edvard Munch: *Livsfrisens tilblivelse*. Oslo, Blomqvist, 1929.
- 13 Gerd Woll: *Edvard Munch. Complete Paintings. Catalogue Raisonné*. London - New York, Thames and Hudson, 2009, 4 vols.