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In Sickness and in Health: An Introduction to the Intimate Relationship between Disease and Creation

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In essence, Arts and Sciences can be described as our attempts to understand and describe the world around us. The relationship between our health and how it affects the way we move through society has never felt more apropos, particularly as COVID-19 continues to dominate public discourse across the world - its ongoing effects, and our attempts to mitigate them, affecting every facet of our lives. In light of this, the 31st issue of FORUM aims to explore what has been identified as ‘sickness’ in literature and art through the years: how the body and mind – in sickness and in health – have been treated by writers, artists, and cultural commentators.

Artists and authors have long recognised the metaphorical potential of sickness and disease to comment upon social and political issues. Charles Dickens, for example, shows how disease transcends social hierarchies in his novel *Bleak House*. Another example is Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, who, in her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, perfectly illustrates attitudes towards the mental and physical health of women in the late nineteenth century. More recently, Ken Currie’s haunting portrait *Three Oncologists* (2002, National Galleries Scotland) expresses the sense of horror and anxiety cancer continues to evoke. The relationship between art and sickness is not unilateral. Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits often deal with her ailing body, and she transmutes her body on canvas with a vivid description of her medical history. Similarly, medical illustration and phrenological heads were used to help physicians puzzle out the mysteries of the human mind and body, while Leonardo da Vinci’s anatomical drawings are considered some of the most significant achievements of Renaissance science. Art therapy - a form of psychotherapy - uses art media as a means of expression and communication. There are multiple examples of sickness, disease, disability, and (mis)diagnosis that pervade art. The body, especially when marked ‘deviant’, ‘non-conforming’, or ‘foreign’, and the psyche, which has been prodded and probed to solve universal questions of identity, human rationale and behaviour, have been continuously explored by authors, poets, artists and philosophers alike .

The articles included within FORUM's 31st issue emphasise the complex and multifaceted interplay between disease, art, and how they are expressed. From the articles submitted to this issue, it is clear that shape and form are given to experiences of illness through acts of creating. They bring maladies into existence in ways that are comprehensible, and enable artists to comment upon how their race, gender, sexuality, and social class affect their experiences. We will explore posthumanist readings of AIDS discourses in the poetry of Essex Hemphill, analyse intersectional representations of female madness in literature, and look at the correlation between depictions of food in Anne Sexton's poetry with her manic and depressive states. In "Art, Disease, and Expression" the intimate connections between creative acts, the way we move through the world, and how we understand illness (and, by extension, ourselves) are placed front and centre.

Works Cited

Currie, Ken. *Three Oncologists (Professor RJ Steele, Professor Sir Alfred Cuschieri and Professor Sir David P Lane of the Department of Surgery and Molecular Oncology, Ninewells Hospital, Dundee)*. 2002, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Author Biography

Amy Waterson is a second year PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests include nineteenth century depictions of children and the influence of scientific discourses upon novel writers; specifically George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Henry James. She has presented her research at the British Association for Victorian Studies annual conference (2018), and University of Durham's Centre for Nineteenth Century Studies (2020). She has been the co-editor of FORUM since September 2020.