

EDVARD MUNCH'S 'ALPHA AND OMEGA' SERIES:  
A SUMMATION OF THE FRIEZE OF LIFE SERIES

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Alpha and Omega series was executed in 1908, during Munch's hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic where he was receiving intense treatments for a mental breakdown. The subject matter and the iconography of the Alpha and Omega series is closely interrelated with Munch's most significant works, the Frieze of Life series, with which he was preoccupied between the years 1892 to 1902. The two main issues of the Frieze of Life series which deal with the relationships between man and woman and the aspects of life and death, are closely associated with Munch's philosophy on life, love and death as it was formulated from his personal experiences.

Between the years 1902 to 1908, Munch no longer painted works which were thematically or iconographically related to the Frieze of Life series. These years are stigmatized as his wandering years which were spent travelling around Europe. He purposely stayed away from Norway, because during this period he tried to avoid any confrontation with memories of past experiences which he feared might affect his mental and physical stability.

Finally in 1908, he suffered a severe mental crisis and admitted himself to a psychiatric clinic in Copenhagen.

With his doctor's encouragement, Munch carried out his previous plans of putting together a portfolio made up of a poem about man and woman, and illustrated by a series of lithographs; in this work, he once again dealt with the philosophical issues of life, love and death. Through the revaluation of Munch's philosophies which were closely interrelated with his inner feelings and anxieties, his doctor believed that Munch would be able to bring under control all his frustrations and thus recover from his mental illness.

An examination of the social and philosophical milieu in which Munch lived and worked, will enable one to comprehend his philosophy on life, love and death as it was derived from his personal experience. An analysis of the works which constitute the Frieze of Life series will later be used for comparison between the Frieze and the Alpha and Omega series.

Through the revaluation of his philosophies as they were recreated in the Alpha and Omega cycle and through the final conclusion of the cycle, in which he sought vengeance on woman for the harm she had caused him, he summarized all his philosophical notions concerning life, love and death. After the completion of the Alpha and Omega cycle, and after his recovery, he seldom, if at all, executed works which were related to the main issues of the Frieze of Life series.

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## CHAPTER I

THE SOCIAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL MILIEU WHICH  
INFLUENCED MUNCH'S LIFE AND WORKS

Edvard Munch's most famous works, which constitute the Frieze of Life series, are concerned with the philosophical issues of life, love and death. Munch's philosophical theories on these issues were primarily influenced by two major factors: first, by his family environment and second, by the Bohémian milieus in which he worked and lived.

Munch's youth was very unhappy. His family environment was constantly threatened by sickness and death. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was five years old; nine years later one of his sisters also died from the same disease. Later still, another was admitted to a mental institution. Munch himself was weak, often sick, and did not attend school regularly. His father, a medical doctor, was a pious and conservative man who, after his wife's death, became extremely religious and lost all affection and understanding for his children. He was a tense and short-tempered man and left the care of his children to his sister-in-law. As Munch grew older, his father's reclusiveness and emphasis on religion affected him a great deal and resulted in constant and bitter arguments between them.

At the age of eighteen Munch began his artistic

education at the Royal Academy of Kristiania, under Norway's most famous naturalistic artist, Christian Krogh. Once he left his family environment and came into the city of Kristiania to study art, he became involved with a group of literary and artistic figures, known as Kristiania Bohèmes.<sup>1</sup> This Bohémian circle consisted of a group of anarchists, who opposed all social conventions which they believed undermined the natural and social impulses and finally led to hypocrisy. They were anti-bourgeois; influenced by Marx's writings. Marx's philosophies impressed the Kristiania Bohèmes because they faced the oppression of the Swedish rule and the rise of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The most influential figure of the Bohème circle was Hans Jaeger, who was a determinist and an advocate of free love. He expressed his social criticism quite openly in his novels (e.g. 'Sick Love', 1885). Jaeger in 1885, published his major work 'Kristiania Bohémian'.<sup>3</sup> This book was like a biographical text of the lives of the Kristiania Bohèmes; it described Jaeger's personal love experiences and his criticism on the fallacies of the bourgeois society. Also in 1886, Christian Krogh published a novel, called 'Albertina', which described the life of a prostitute. Krogh's novel was confiscated, but a year later he painted a large work which depicted a scene from his novel. Munch was influenced by both Jaeger's novels and Krogh's literary and artistic works.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of his artistic education, Munch had executed naturalistic works, with general themes like portrait, Portrait of The Artist's Sister Inger, 1884 (Fig. 1),

and landscapes, Evening, 1888 (Fig. 2). In these paintings he primarily concentrates on the formal structure of the work rather than the content. Yet, at the same time he painted a number of works, Day After, 1885 (Fig. 3), and Tête-à-tête, 1885 (Fig. 4), which indicate that he was becoming influenced by Jaeger's and Krogh's works, as well as by the social environment of the Bohèmes. In these paintings he not only deals with its formal aspects but with the content as well. Like Jaeger's and Krogh's works, the subject matter of Day After, has<sup>a</sup> a prostitute and a scene from her life, as its basic theme. Tête-à-tête also represents a scene from the life of the Bohèmes as Jaeger described them in his novel 'Kristiania Bohémian'.

These Bohèmes were also greatly influenced by Henrik Ibsen's literary works which placed a great emphasis on the individual and his social role within his environment. Ibsen emphasized the duty of the individual towards himself. The Bohèmes used this concept as their primary code of their artistic and literary aims which claimed: "thou shalt write down one's own life". This focus on the individual and his behaviour, also expressed by Kierkegaard and Van Hartmann, developed a great interest in the study of psychology, during and after the 1880's.<sup>5</sup> This interest primarily depended on the social conditions of the time. The vast growth of industrialization and the expansion of the cities had resulted in the loss of the individual's natural function as a human being within his society. This self-deception, was "the

expression of a frame of mind in which the western world had lost its exuberant belief in itself".<sup>6</sup>

Scandinavian writers, like their counterparts in France, changed by the end of the 1880's, from a social and realistic literature to a mystical and psychological one. Munch's art work also changed from realistic to psychological. In 1889 he moved to Paris, with a government scholarship, to continue his artistic education. For a while he was involved with the impressionists and tried to copy their style. He executed a number of works in the impressionistic manner, Rue Lafayette, 1891 (Fig. 5), Spring Day on Karl Johan Street, 1891 (Fig. 6). But at the same time, during his summer visits at Norway, he executed a number of works, The Sick Child, first version done in 1886 (Fig. 7), Melancholy, 1891 (Fig. 19), Two Human Beings - The Lonely Ones, 1889 (Fig. 8), which demonstrate that Munch was beginning to be concerned with the individual and his feelings. These works depict the individual in melancholy and despair, isolated from his environment and society. They deal with illness, Sick Child, separation and isolation of the individual, Melancholy, and with the isolation of man and woman, Two Human Beings - The Lonely Ones.

Munch considered the Sick Child, which was primarily inspired by the memories of his sister's death, to be the work which marked the turning point of his artistic career. He explained that:

In the Sick Child I broke new trails for myself. It was a breakthrough in my art. Most of what I later did was born in this painting.<sup>7</sup>

This painting is significant because it is the first work in which he fulfills his intention as he first stated in 1891, which was to depict human emotions:

The painter depicts his deepest emotions, his soul, his sorrows and joys. He depicts the human being not the object. These paintings are designed to move people.<sup>8</sup>

In Sick Child Munch wanted to portray the state of a sick child and the effect that illness has on the patient, as well as on the relatives.

The contradictory tendencies that were in existence in Europe by the end of the 19th century had an effect on woman and her social role within society. Up to the end of the 1880's, the social attitude towards woman was a Victorian one; that is, one of male dominance and suppression. In the arts the suppression of woman was disguised by the false idealization of woman.<sup>9</sup> This idealized woman never existed. In reality woman's role had changed according to the demands of urban industrial development. Woman was forced to leave home and go to work in factories or offices. Women, as wage earners, were reaching a social status equal to that of man. As a result, "man began to see woman as a threat to the power that he had exercised in society up to that time".<sup>10</sup> This resulted in a battle between the sexes.

In literature, this battle was best expressed in the works of the Scandinavian writers like Ibsen and Strindberg. Ibsen in his play 'The Doll's House' described how a married woman finally reacts against the suppression

imposed on her by her domineering husband as well as by society. Strindberg in his play 'The Father' is driven to insanity by his wife. In the last argument between the father and his wife, the father explains that all the women in his life had brought him nothing but pain:

My mother, who didn't want to bring me, into the world because my birth would bring her pain, she was my enemy..... My sister was my enemy, when she taught me to be her vessel. The first woman I took in my arms, was my enemy for she gave me ten years' illness in return for the love I gave her. My daughter became my enemy, when she had to choose between me and you. And you, my wife, you were my mortal enemy, for you never let me be, till you had be lying dead.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, by the end of the 19th century, there were two opposing social attitudes towards woman: woman as a virgin and woman as a prostitute. The virgin was the idealized woman who in reality was suppressed by man. The prostitute was the vilified woman who had refused to be suppressed by man.

Munch was influenced by these social attitudes towards woman. The social and philosophical milieu that he was exposed to after 1892, his personal experiences, and most of all, his art works, which have woman as a central theme, elucidate the great influence that the social attitudes towards woman had on him.

After 1892, when Munch exhibited his art at Berlin, he attracted a number of individuals who were known as the Berlin Bohèmes. This Bohème circle was made up of a number of Scandinavian writers; Strindberg, Heiberg and Drachman; a

Polish poet, S. Przybyszewski; the German writers, Richard Dehmel, Arno Holz and Max Dauthendey; the German art critic Meier-Graefe, and the Norwegian composer Frank Delius. Most of these individuals were advocates of psychology, symbolism, mysticism, the occult and alchemy.<sup>12</sup> They were attracted to Munch's work because they felt that his work represented their philosophical theories on psychology and symbolism. For example, Przybyszewski in 1894 wrote an article on Munch's work viewing it from the philosophical perspective of the new psychology.<sup>13</sup> Max Dauthendey was attracted to the symbolical elements in Munch's work, The Vision, 1893 (Fig. 9). As a result, he wrote a study on Munch's art works and a poem on the theme of The Vision.<sup>14</sup>

Strindberg also wrote a review for one of Munch's exhibitions, which was held at the Bing's Gallery in Paris, in 1896. Strindberg, along with Przybyszewski, was one of Munch's best friends and a supporter of his ideas on woman.<sup>15</sup> He was a misogynist who clearly expressed his hatred for woman in many of his books, like 'The Madman's Defense'. In this book, he dealt with puritan disgust for sensual desires, as well as with the inner feelings of love, hatred and sadism which he related to sexual drives. He conceived of women as whores and vampires who try to outwit men and suck away all their energy. Munch also conceived of women in the same way and represented them in many of his works as whores, The Alley, 1894 (Fig. 10) and vampires, Vampire, 1893 (Fig. 17).

Munch's sexual relationships during the Berlin period were as unsatisfactory and discouraging as the ones in which he had been involved in Kristiania. During the 1880's among the Kristiania circle, he had been engaged in numerous love affairs which negated any personal involvement. But one of his relationships, which lasted for six years and ended with his trip to Paris in 1889, was with a married woman, three years his elder.<sup>16</sup> This affair affected him a great deal. The presence of the woman's husband and of her other lovers haunted him and created feelings of envy and distrust. In the following years his relations with women were always of short duration; he always left a woman as soon as he realized that her intentions were serious. He claimed to be against marriage because he felt that too often the woman he loved did not want him. Yet he was filled with love and affection for women who belonged to other men. An example of such a relationship was his attitude towards Dagny Juel, Przybyszewski's wife. Munch was fascinated by her wit and her beauty and used her in many of his works, including the Madonna, 1895 versions (Fig. 23), and Salome.

Munch had a very painful and destructive relationship with a woman who belonged to the Norwegian bourgeois society. Their relationship lasted for four years, during which the woman tried to bind him to her side. Munch decided to leave her, because he feared that his work and his interests might be affected by the woman's destructiveness. But the woman

was determined to marry him, and sought help from her friends who tried to get him back to her. The events that followed<sup>17</sup> had bad effects on Munch and also made his personal existence difficult in Norway; as a result he moved away in 1904. Munch never quite recovered from his experiences with this woman and her friends; the affair haunted him until his nervous breakdown in 1908.

As a result of the social milieu in which Munch worked and lived and of his personal experiences with women, he began to conceive of women as having three basic characteristics. Initially, as a young woman entering adolescence, she is pure and virginal. Later, as man's sexual partner, she is extremely dishonest and a threat to man's existence. He saw her as "a whore who at all times of the day and night seeks to outwit man and cause his fall".<sup>18</sup> Finally, in the role of a mother, he thought of woman as a heroic figure who is willing to risk death in order to bring forth life.

Munch painted a great number of works which have as a central theme woman and her various aspects. A key to an understanding of all his works which deal with woman is a sketch he made, Symbolic Study, 1893 (Fig. 11), for the painting, Three Aspects of Woman, 1895 (Fig. 12). These works will be dealt with in chapter II.

## CHAPTER I NOTES

1

This Norwegian Bohème circle resembled the Montparnasse Bohèmes of Paris.

2

Munch was also aware of Norway's political situation. In later years, between 1904-1906, when he was abroad, he wrote to his aunt of his concern for his country, and of his desire that Norway become liberated from the Swedish rule.

3

Hans Jaeger's book, 'Kristiania Bohemian', was confiscated immediately after its publication, and Jaeger was imprisoned for two years.

4

Munch read Jaeger's books and kept them all his life. In 1905, while still abroad, he wrote to ask his aunt to go to his home at Aasgaardstrand and take Jaeger's books back home with her. See: Inger E. Munch, Edvard Munchs Breu Familien (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tamum Forlag, 1949), Letter 234, dated 27,7,1905.

5

Kierkegaard, like Ibsen, placed a great emphasis on the individual's ability to choose and decide for himself. Also, Van Hartmann wrote 'The Philosophy and the Sub-conscious' (published in 1869) which deals with the individual and his sub-conscious.

6

Arnold Hauser, The Social History of Art (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), p. 220.

7

Johan H. Laangard and Reidar Revold, Edvard Munch (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p. 52.

8

Reinhold Heller, "Edvard Munch and Clarification of Life", Oberlin College Bulletin, 29/3 (spring, 1972), 122.

9

"It was an era in which women were kept as virtual pets, set up on marble pedestals and made to feel helpless and therefore desirable..... A woman perched on a pedestal makes for an attractive decoration, and her supposedly

## CHAPTER I NOTES (cont'd)

precarious position poses very little threat to anyone's virility. Few artists represented women as they really were." Jan Thompson, "The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau", Art Journal, 31 (Winter, 1971-72), 188.

10

Hans Hess, How Pictures Mean, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), p. 74.

11

August Strindberg, The Father, (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 71.

12

For example, Przybyszewski was greatly interested in psychology. In 1892 he had written a study "Towards a Psychology of the Individual". He had also seriously studied and practised occultism and wrote a book on the history of satanism.

13

Przybyszewski explained that:  
The old art and the old psychology had been an art and a psychology of the conscious personality, whereas the new art was the art of the individual. All that is profound and obscure everything from which the medium of language has as yet divided no system of definition and which is thus inarticulate and has manifested itself only as a dim presentiment finds expression in the colours of Munch and thus enters into our unconsciousness. J.P. Hodin, "Edvard Munch: The Founder of Expressionism", Studio, 166 (November, 1963), 182.

14

Max Dauthendey's poem 'The Vision' is included in Reinhold Heller's article, "Edvard Munch's Vision and the Symbolist Swan", Art Quarterly, 36 (Autumn, 1973), 211.

15

Most of the art historians, as well as many of Munch's contemporaries believe that Strindberg was the primary influence on Munch's conception of woman, as being a threat of man. For example, Max Dauthendey wrote a comedy 'Maya', in which he concentrates on the relationship between Strindberg and Munch and explains how Strindberg influenced Munch.

16

Munch wrote of this affair in his fictional diaries, in which he referred to the woman as "Fre Heiberg".

## CHAPTER I NOTES (cont'd)

17

The woman's friends decided to lie to Munch and pretend that she was dying. They hurried to get Munch to her side, and what followed is quite well known: "One stormy night a ship came sailing from Larhollen to Aasgaardstrand with Munch's friends on board. They had to come and fetch Munch. The lady was at death's door, they said, and wanted to speak to him for the last time. Munch followed them. The lady wrapped in a shroud lay on a bier flanked by two lighted candles. As Munch came towards her she rose up and said: "I knew that you would come." Munch was shocked by this trick. He turned to leave her again, but she took a revolver, pointed it at her breast and threatened to shoot herself. To quiet her, Munch laid his hand on the muzzle of the gun. It went off, and wounded his middle finger which was crippled ever since." J.P. Hodin, The Dilemma of Being Modern, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 27.

18

Reinhold Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream, (London: Penguin Press, 1973), p. 39.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SIGNIFICANCE AND ORIGIN OF THE FRIEZE OF LIFE SERIES

Between the years 1892 to 1902, Edvard Munch executed his most famous and most significant works, which constitute the Frieze of Life series. Munch himself considered the Frieze of Life as: "one of his most important works if not the most important".<sup>1</sup> In this series, Munch wanted to express his philosophy on life, love and death as he had experienced it. As he emphasized, through his art, he tried to clarify the meaning of life for himself and for others:

In my art, I have tried to clarify life and its meaning for myself. I also intended to help others explain life for themselves.<sup>2</sup>

The Frieze of Life deals with two primary issues: first, the relationship between man and woman, and second the aspects of life and death.

It is often asserted that Munch's conception of the Frieze was formulated out of his German environment and that it was primarily influenced by the literary works of Ibsen and Strindberg.<sup>3</sup> But he denied any external influences, as such, and emphasized that the conception of the Frieze originated during the 1880's, before he moved to Berlin:

Certain art critics have sought to prove that the intellectual content of this Frieze was influenced by German ideas and my contact with

Strindberg in Berlin; I trust that the foregoing comments will suffice to refute this assertion. The themes and moods of the various panels sprang directly from the controversial series of the eighties and constitute a reaction against the realism then prevalent.<sup>4</sup>

In 1889, Munch had begun to write a diary (known as St. Cloud Manifesto), which acted as a self-explanatory text of his inner thoughts and feelings. In one part of the text, he expressed his desires to paint works of art which would depict people as they live, love and suffer. In it, he wrote how these desires had evolved from his experiences and his observations one night in a dance hall in St. Cloud. As Munch was closely watching the people in the dance hall, his eyes caught a couple who were busily involved with each other. In the couple's passionate embraces, he realized how much life depended on the biological union between man and woman, and how, through them, life evolved from one generation to another:

St. Cloud, 1889.

These two in that moment when they are no longer themselves but only one of thousands of links tying one generation to another generation. People should understand the sanctity of this and take off their hats as if they were in church. I would make a number of such paintings (The Frieze of Life series). No longer would interiors, people who only read and knit be painted. These should rather be living people breathing and feeling, suffering and loving. I felt I have to do this. It would be so simple. The flesh would take on form and the colors come to life.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that Munch was involved with the basic relationship between man, woman and life, he was equally concerned with the nature of life and death.

He had been greatly affected by his father's death; his relationship with his father had been one of constant conflict and argument, because of Munch's Bohème style of living and his lack of religious dedication. A few months before his father's death he received from him a bible containing the following inscription: "Blessed are they who hear God's word and keep it. Never forget this. Think often of everlasting eternity."<sup>6</sup> Munch was deeply moved by his father's last gesture and he began to reconsider many of his Bohème philosophies. The death of his father convinced him that there was more to life than the Bohème attitude of living only for the present. He realized that he loved life, yet he feared death which threatened life and which, in his case, had taken the ones that he loved the most. A month after his father's death, he wrote in his St. Cloud Manifesto of his love for life and his fear of death which constantly haunted him:

St. Cloud, 4 Feb. 1890

I truly fear death.  
And I love life. I love the sun that shines  
through the window. I love even the fever and  
its hallucinations, the half-conscious state  
when you see shadows bowing over you. It's  
them, father, your sister who are watching over  
you. You hear the words they whisper.....  
And I live with the dead, my mother, my sister,  
my grandfather, my father, mostly with him.<sup>7</sup>

During this stage of depression, Munch began to conceive of life as an aspect of death, and of love - the biological union between man and woman - as a medial stage of life which leads into death.

The development of the Frieze and the manner in which the works were executed is somewhat vague and complicated. None of the literature on Munch concentrates solely on the development of the Frieze from the beginning until the final completion in 1902. Only Reinhold Heller attempts to give a systematic study of the genesis and meaning of the Frieze.<sup>8</sup> Yet this study does not include the final series of the Frieze, as it was exhibited in the 1902 Berlin Secession. Nothing much is known about the Berlin Secession exhibition except that the Frieze was described in the catalogue as a series "of pictures of life". Also, the series consisted of 22 paintings and it was divided into four sections under the headings: Seeds of Love, Flowering and Passing of Love, Life and Anxiety, Death. The only other information that is available on this exhibition is Heller's description of it. He claims that the narrative plot of the Frieze was primarily based on the theme of love:

Love begins during midsummer night with dreams of coming love which are followed by the first kiss. Course of love continues, pleasure mingled with pain, attaining highest intensity in the Madonna face loving woman, love disrupted thoughts of jealousy and dies in the moment of despair.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in order to reassess the significance of the Frieze of Life it is appropriate to deal with its various works which concentrate on the two basic issues of the Frieze - the relationship between man and woman and the aspects of life and death.

## MAJOR WORKS OF THE FRIEZE OF LIFE SERIES

The main issues that Munch was confronted with in the Frieze (the relationship between man and woman and the aspect of life and death) were primarily related to his conception of the three basic types of woman; the virgin, temptress and mother. He associated most of the works of the Frieze with one or more of these three types.

An understanding of Munch's conception of the three basic characteristics of woman is essential in order to comprehend the theme of the Frieze's works. The virgin, according to Munch, is the pure young woman entering adolescence. The temptress is man's sexual partner, extremely dishonest and a threat to man's existence. The mother-widow, is a heroic figure who risks death to bring forth life.

In 1893 Munch made a sketch, Symbolic Study (Fig. 11), for one of his primary works, The Three Aspects of Woman (Fig. 12). In this study, he incorporates all the variations of a woman's character. The sketch is made up of a frame which divides the study into two parts. The outer vertical and horizontal parts of the frame are made up of female figures. The dividing element in the middle of the study is also made up of three female heads, which are placed over a man's head. This frame encloses two scenes. The first scene depicts a variation of the Melancholy-Jealousy theme. In this version of the melancholy theme, which preoccupied Munch a great deal,

the primary roles have been altered. The male figure, who is the primary element in the original version, has been replaced here by a female figure. The scene depicts a young woman dressed in white, seated on the shore, rejected by her lover who walks away with another woman. The other scene represents a variation of the theme To The Forest. The scene depicts a young woman, dressed in red, cuddled by a man. The couple walks off towards the forest.

The frame represents the three main aspects of woman: the virgin, the temptress and the mother or widow. The virgin woman is represented by the yellow female figure on the left who folds her hands timidly in front of her. The temptress is represented by the red-violet figure, who lies sensually at the top of the frame with horns sprouting diabolically from her head. The mother is represented by the green nude at the right who folds her hands prayerfully and has a halo over her head. The theme of the three aspects of woman is repeated for the second time in the sketch by the trichephalous female image which is used as a dividing element. Yet, the theme is partly alternated here to redevelop the theme as it is conceived by a man. He implies this, by representing a bearded man in a contemplative mood facing downwards with his eyes closed. He is obviously thinking of the different types of woman which are symbolically depicted over his head: the virgin is represented by the blonde haired head; the temptress by the red-haired head and the mother by

the black-haired head.

In this same sketch, Munch also deals with the theme of death, which was an important element within the Frieze of Life representing another aspect of life. Death is here portrayed by the greyish, green corpse which lies underneath the man. The theme of death is incorporated in this sketch because Munch conceived it to be another aspect of woman, since he believed that the mother heroically risked life to bring forth an offspring. He simplified the Symbolic Study, into the painting Three Aspects of Woman, which represents three female figures underneath a tree, in front of the sea shore. He made a number of versions of this painting, usually alternating the background effects or some details of the figures. Yet the central theme remains the same: the virgin figure is always depicted in white, and faces the sea; the temptress is always portrayed naked with her arms outstretched over her head; and the mother-widow figure is always depicted in black facing downwards with her hands folded in front of her. The symbolic representation of these three figures is purposely used to exemplify the three types of woman, as Munch himself conceived them:

The three women. Irene, dressed in white,  
gazing dreamily out into life.  
Maya, hungry for life naked.  
The woman of sorrows with rigid pale face among  
the trees Irene's fate - as nurse.<sup>10</sup>

The idyllic setting of the trees and the sea shore is also symbolic. It is associated with Nordic mythology and the

northern traditional concept of woman.<sup>11</sup> In the Nordic myths, woman also belonged to three basic types which were symbolically represented by the three maidens known as Norns. The Norns were related to the tree of life, Yggdrasill, which they guarded and took care of. Andreas Munch stated the myth of the Norns as follows:

The world had for its centre a great tree, a mighty ash called Yggdrasill. So huge was this tree that its branches stretched out over heaven and earth alike. Three roots supported the great trunk and one passed into the realm of the Aesir, a second into that of the frost giants, and a third into the realm of the dead. Beneath the root in giantland was the spring of Mimir, whose waters contained wisdom and understanding. Near the spring of fate dwelt three maidens called the Norns, who ruled the destinies of man and were called Fate (Vrōr) Being (Verōandi) and Necessity (Skuld). They watered the tree each day with pure water and whitened it with clay from the spring, and in this way preserved its life. 12

Munch's association with Nordic mythology is to be found in other primary works of the Frieze, which are related to the theme of love and death.

The virginal aspect of woman is associated with one of the Frieze's primary works known as the Voice, 1893 (Fig. 13), which constitutes the first stage of the Frieze's narrative plot of love. In the Voice Munch deals with the theme of the adolescent girl who has become aware of her sexual abilities. The painting depicts a young girl, dressed in white, with her arms behind her, standing among the trees with a view of a sea shore and the moon in the background. He depicts this young woman in a psychological state as she becomes awakened

by her sexual drives:

Munch shows us the recently matured girl as she has her Summer Night's Dream; i.e. how the sexual will rises stiffly for the first time during a pale, moonlit night near the sea, and how the girl roves among the trees, longly, all her limbs nervously tense, her hands rampled together behind her, her head tossed back, and her eyes staring, staring wide and vampire-like.<sup>13</sup>

Munch associates the woman's sexual desires with an inner voice which tries to come out of her. Also, the woman's pose, which is partially related to the temptress's pose in the painting The Three Aspects of Woman, increases her provocative quality. By depicting the young woman with her arms held behind her, he implies that she is ready to present herself to a man.

The male personage in this painting is symbolically represented by the phallic symbol of the round moon and its column-like reflection on the water. Munch used this phallic symbol in a number of his works which have eroticism as a central theme.<sup>14</sup> The identification of the phallic symbol with organic shapes, such as the moon and the sun, dates back to Egyptian times. During the Egyptian era, the moon represented the female personage and the sun the male. Munch altered the traditional symbolism; for him the moon was associated with the male personage. This altered identification has its origin in Nordic mythology. In Norse mythology the moon is described as a masculine persona; the brother of the sun:

The gods caused time to exist, sending Night and Day to drive round the heavens in chariots drawn by swift horses. Two fair children, a girl

called sun and a boy called moon were also set by them on paths across the sky.<sup>15</sup>

Munch associated the phallic image of the moon with the symbolic scenes of the forest and the sea scape; to scenes and objects that he saw in nature. He was inspired by Aasgaardstrand's scenery and used it as the symbolic setting for most of the works of the Frieze.<sup>16</sup> The forests and the trees were associated with the mythological life tree, Yggdrasill. In Norse Mythology, the forests were conceived of as sacred areas where sacred rites were performed. Also Aasgaard was the place where their gods resided: "Once heaven and earth were formed, it was time to set about the building of Aasgaard, the realm of the gods."<sup>17</sup> Thus Munch portrayed most of the works of the Frieze within a symbolic sacred setting. For example, the theme of the Voice (an adolescent woman awakening to her first sexual desires) is given both a sacred and a symbolic effect. By depicting the young girl within the sacred surroundings of a forest where pre-christian rites were performed, he makes the first experiences of love analogous to the Norse traditional religious acts. Also, the forest and the shores of the fjord are Northern symbols of the traditional meeting place of Norwegian lovers at midnight; the time of courting.

The second stage of woman - the temptress - is related to the majority of the Frieze's works which have as a central theme the relationship between man and woman. Munch presents the first stage of love, in the scene of Attraction,

1896 (Fig. 14), where he depicts the couple as they first meet and turn towards each other in a midsummer night setting. The man's attachment to the woman is symbolically implied by the woman's long hair, which encircles and engulfs the figure of the man.<sup>18</sup> Also the unity between the man and the woman is symbolically represented by the phallic symbol which is placed between them.

The second stage of love, which is represented in The Kiss, 1892 (Fig. 15), depicts the first sexual experience between the couple. Munch represents the couple as they are lost in a passionate kiss, their bodies tightly embracing each other. Following the kiss is the biological union between man and woman, as it takes place in To The Forest, 1897 (Fig. 16), where no one can disturb them. Munch gave a prominent place to this painting, within the Frieze, by describing it as the painting which holds the whole life cycle together:

The theme of the largest picture, Man and Woman, in the forest, showing the two figures, perhaps stands somewhat apart from the others, but it is as necessary to the Frieze as a whole as the buckle is to the belt. It is a picture of life as of death; of the forest, that sucks the nourishment from the dead: of the city that rises beyond the treetops. It is a portrayal of the powerful forces that support our lives. 19

The theme To The Forest is not only associated with the theme of love and with the relationship between man and woman, but also with the second issue of the Frieze's intentions, that is, the aspects of life and death.

Munch had a double image of woman as the temptress

in the role of man's sexual partner. As the woman who was willing to come into union with man in order to bring forth life, she was considered to be the woman who was fulfilling her natural role in life. But as a sexual partner of man, she was conceived as a whore who tries to outwit man and suck his blood and his energy. In Vampire, 1893 (Fig. 17), Munch represents a woman bending over a man, her long hair enveloping most of his body. Driven by his sexual desires man turns to woman for relief only to find out that she has changed into a vampire because of her strong sexual desires. She bends over him, like an animal eager to drain his sexual energy away: "In Vampire man falls victim to the consequences of his desires. He is trapped and enveloped by woman the witch." <sup>20</sup> The theme of woman as a victor over man and man's despair and emptiness after sexual union is more fully developed in Ashes, 1894 (Fig. 18). In Ashes Munch depicts a young woman with long hair standing with her hands over her head. (Again her pose is reminiscent of the temptress's pose in The Three Aspects of Woman). Her dress is half open, which implies that an erotic act has taken place. The woman stands triumphantly erect, as she has outwitted man through their sexual act and has made him, her prey. Man is depicted in the near corner, with his hands over his bent head. His sexual experiences with the woman have driven him away in despair, rather than binding him closer to her.

Another aspect of man's despair, which was related

to his relationship with woman, was the woman's rejection of man for another lover. The two works of the Frieze's series, Melancholy, 1891 (Fig. 19) and Jealousy, 1895 (Fig. 20), deal with this aspect of rejection. In Melancholy Munch deals with the psychological effects that the woman's rejection have on man. He depicts the rejected lover seated on the shore, with his back turned away from the sea and the couple on the fjord. He faces downwards, resting his head on his arm. He seems to be lost in his thoughts, brooding over the woman's rejection. Munch, in his description of this work explained the psychological effects that such a rejection have on a lover:

When you left me to cross the ocean, it was as if some wires held us together. They tore open something like a wound. 21

The theme of separation was also restated in the painting Separation, 1896 (Fig. 21) which is counterpart to the first stage of love, Attraction. In Separation Munch depicts the couple in the same midsummer setting as in Attraction, but here the couple turns away from each other; the woman triumphantly looking towards the sea, the man, defeated facing downwards.

The final stage of the Frieze's narrative plot of love, The Scream, 1893 (Fig. 22), deals with the ultimate despair of man which leads him to insanity. In Despair, 1892, Munch depicted a lonely man on the fjord looking downwards. In 1893, in The Scream, the figure of the man is replaced by

a skeletal image which looks out of the picture with its mouth wide open and its hands over its ears. The image is sexless and its body takes the shape of the linear curvature of the striated landscape and sky. On one of these red striations, Munch wrote "can only have been done by someone insane".<sup>22</sup> This scene represents an intense mood of anxiety and dread which is projected from an inner state to an exterior one; from the introspection of the subconscious to an environment infected by the inner state. Man's ultimate despair and insanity results from his relationship with woman and from his complete isolation from his social and natural environment.

The second primary issue of the Frieze's theme which deals with the philosophical aspects of life and death is related to the third aspect of woman, the mother or widow figure. The mother aspect of woman was primarily represented in the theme of Madonna, 1895 (Fig. 23), in which Munch depicts the mother as saint; an idolized figure with a halo over her head. He encircles the figure by a frame made up of spermatozoa and a fetus image placed at the far left corner of the frame in order to symbolically imply the natural role of mother in life. The Madonna was described by one of Munch's friends, Sigbjorn Obstfelder, as the epitome of woman, in her role of bringing forth life:

For me, his Madonna painting is the epitome of his art. It is the world's madonna, woman who gives birth in pain.....that which lies at the bottom of life as not clearly seen by

our eyes, either in form, color or idea.....  
 Munch sees woman as she carries the greatest  
 marvel of the world in her womb.....He seeks  
 to depict that moment when she first becomes  
 conscious of this in all its gruesomeness.<sup>23</sup>

Munch considered woman the lifegiver - as a heroic figure who was willing to court death in order to bring forth the gift of life. He conceived her as the immediate factor which links generation to generation:

Another aspect of woman is the earth, anxious always waiting to be inseminated to take place at the proper time and anxious to have the seed grow. This was the woman offering herself for the life of the child, The Madonna, serving as the link in the chain of generations.<sup>24</sup>

Munch associated the act of birth and life with the aspect of death. He believed that the aspects of life and death depended on and emerged from each other. His philosophy of life and death were dependent on the belief of an afterlife. But his conception of an afterlife was not related to the christian concept. He believed that the afterlife was a medial stage in the constant evolving circle of life and death. Munch defined his conception of the afterlife, in one of his self-explanatory texts:

One must believe in an afterlife because it can be demonstrated that the atoms of life - or the life spirit - must continue to exist even after the body dies. But this characteristic of holding a body together, of causing matter to change and develop, this life-spirit of what does it consist?

There is nothing that ceases to exist; there is no example in nature of something ceasing to exist. A body does not disappear after it dies. Its components separate are from the other and become transformed. But of what does this actual spirit of life really consist?<sup>25</sup>

Munch associated the medial stage of the afterlife with the decomposition of a human corpse; as it disintegrates into the surrounding components of the earth, to become fertilizers for the new life. The process of metabolism, from the stage of death into life, was incorporated by Munch in a number of studies, Man Under Tree, 1902, Woman With Tree, 1897 and into a lithograph, Life and Death, 1897 (Fig. 24). This work is divided into an upper and lower region by means of a horizontal band. In the lower section, which represents the underground section of the earth, a woman's corpse with a bloated body, lies, as if buried in the earth. From her, gaseous face masks rise up along the border which divides the two regions of the picture. At the left side, along the border, beneath a tree that grows out of a skull and spreads its branches laden with fruit, stands a pregnant woman facing towards the sea. The process of life in this work is symbolically associated with the woman - the mother - lifegiver; with the tree of life, Yggdrasill (as in the Norse mythology); with the sea; and also with the decomposed bodies which act as fertilizer for the new life.

The paintings which have been discussed in the second part of this chapter constitute part of the Frieze's series. These paintings represent some of the basic themes of the Frieze's issues, which concentrate on the relationship between man and woman and the aspects of life and death.

## CHAPTER II NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Heller, Edvard Munch's 'Life Frieze': Its Beginnings and Origins. (Indiana University: Ph.D. Dissertation, 1969), p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Heller, "Edvard Munch and Clarification of Life". Oberlin College Bulletin, 29/3 (Spring, 1972), 121.

<sup>3</sup> This assertion is supported by the majority of the art historians who have written on Munch. Yet it is best stated in the Winnipeg Art Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, Edvard Munch: The Graphic Works, (1969-1970) p. 10. "This expansive effort was obviously the fruit of intense personal experiences, as well as a visual expression of literary and philosophical ideas currently expounded by Scandinavian, German and Slavonic artists (sic) of his close acquaintance with Ibsen and Strindberg among others."

<sup>4</sup> Johan H. Langaard and Reidar Revold, Edvard Munch, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>6</sup> Heller, "Edvard Munch and Clarification of Life", 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 128-9.

<sup>8</sup> Heller, Edvard Munch's 'Life Frieze': Its Beginnings and Origins.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream (London: Penguin Press, 1973), p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Langaard and Revold, Edvard Munch, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Munch had learned the Nordic mythology and the Sagas Tales at an early age from his uncle Andreas, who was an expert historian, and an authority on Nordic mythology.

## CHAPTER II NOTES (cont'd)

12

Ellis, H.R. Davidson, Gods, Myths of Northern Europe (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), p. 26.

13

Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream, 46.

14

Munch used this phallic symbol in the following works:

The Voice, 1895 (Painting).  
 Moonlight, 1895 (Painting).  
 Woman, 1895 (Drypoint and Aquatint).  
 Attraction, 1896 (Lithograph).  
 Three Aspects of Woman, 1896 (Lithograph).  
 Evening, 1897 (Lithograph).  
 Salome Paraphrase, 1898 (Woodcut).  
 Two Women on the Shore, 1898 (Painting).  
 Summer Night - The Voice, 1898 (Painting).  
 Head of Woman below a Woman's Breast, 1898 (Woodcut).  
 Dance of Life, 1899-1900 (Painting).  
 Dance on the Shore, 1900-1902 (Painting).  
 Seascape, 1898 (Woodcut).  
 Menschen and Tiere, 1908 (Lithograph).  
 Woman on the Shore on a Moonlight, 1921 (Painting).  
 Evening (from Alpha and Omega cycle), 1908 (Lithograph).

15

Davidson, Gods, Myths of Northern Europe, 28.

16

Even when Munch moved away from Norway, he continued to use a Norwegian setting for his works. Often, in the description of his works in letters to his aunt, he emphasized that the settings were taken from his home at Aasgaardstrand:

"And the motif is taken from the beach outside my house at Aasgaardstrand". Inger Munch, Edvard Munchs Brev Familien. (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1949), Letter 232, written at Nordstraand 19,12,1904.

17

Davidson, Gods, Myths of Northern Europe, 28.

18

In many of his works, Munch used the device of a woman's long flowing hair to imply the bond between man and woman.

## CHAPTER II NOTES (cont'd)

- 19 Langaard and Revold, Edvard Munch, 56.
- 20 Los Angeles, Museum of Art, Edvard Munch: Lithographs, Etchings, Woodcuts. (January 28 - March 9, 1969,) p. 13.
- 21 Heller, "Edvard Munch and Clarification of Life", 127.
- 22 Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream, 87.
- 23 Heller, Edvard Munch's 'Life Frieze': Its Beginnings and Its Origins, 195-6.
- 24 Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream, 39.
- 25 Reinhold Heller, "The Iconography of Edvard Munch's Sphinx", Artforum, 9 (October, 1970), 75.

## CHAPTER III

MUNCH'S LIFE AND ART BETWEEN THE YEARS 1902 to 1908 -  
HIS MENTAL BREAKDOWN

The years between Munch's last exhibition of the Frieze of Life in 1902, and his mental breakdown in 1908, are significant years which indicate the reasons behind Munch's nervous breakdown.

By the turn of the century the Berlin Bohèmes had dispersed, primarily because of the constant arguments between the members of the group. Conflicts had developed among them as to who was the originator of their ideas and philosophies which they all expressed similarly, either in their literary or artistic works. Strindberg left Berlin for Paris; Delius moved to England; Przybyszewski, after his wife's death, moved to Poland and cut off all his previous ties with his friends in Norway and Germany. Munch also decided to move back to Norway and settle for good at his summer home at Aasgaardstrand. By that time, his work was receiving great recognition in Norway and Germany; he held many exhibitions, sold many of his works and received many commissions to paint private works. At last, Munch believed that now he could afford to settle at his summer home and continue his art work in peace.

But after settling at Aasgaardstrand, he was confronted with a serious of conflicts between his Norwegian

mistress, whom he had decided to leave, and their common friends. After the dreadful shooting incident, his life in Norway became unbearable. Wherever he went, he met the woman and her friends, who made loud public scenes.<sup>1</sup> Munch was unable to bear this situation and he began to drink very heavily and got involved in many public fights with his friends. In one of these incidents, in 1904, he nearly killed one of his friends, a painter named Ludvig Korsten. The affair was made public in the local newspapers. Munch was deeply disturbed and decided to move away from Norway until all these incidents were forgotten.

As a result of these incidents, his work and fame began to suffer. Because the public scandals were in the local news, Munch lost the favour of the Norwegian people and found it difficult to sell his works or get any commissions in Norway. In one of his letters to his aunt, he explained the situation he was faced with:

I find it would in the long run be impossible to live in Norway where artists are regarded as scandals (sic) and a bit of careless behavior can be regarded as plebeian and one cannot even make a penny.<sup>2</sup>

Munch decided to move back to Germany to get away from his Norwegian friends and to enable him to get good commissions. The following years, until the year of his mental breakdown in 1908, can be characterized as the most transient years of Munch's life.

In Germany he led an unstable life, moving from one

hotel to another, or boarding with rich families who had commissioned him to paint private works. In the early months of his travels he was very happy to be away from Norway and very satisfied with his work and new acquaintances. He wrote to his aunt:

I am here and away from Norwegians which is a consolation.....Here I have found peace..... and I feel very well. I think I will rent a house in Germany out in the country. I must get away from the whole unsavory story and the Bohemians and have a peaceful existence for a while.<sup>3</sup>

But after a while Munch once again began to complain, either about his surroundings or his patrons, or about the state of his nerves which were affected by his memories of the incidents in Norway. He began to travel more frequently from one part of Germany to another, and occupied himself more intensely with his art work in order to forget his bad memories. But the fatigue of constant travelling and the pressure of his work had a bad effect on his nerves and resulted in a minor nervous breakdown in 1905. Munch decided to move to a health resort at Bad Lorscheim in Thuringia, for relaxation and a possible cure. But although the therapy at the resort gave him some measure of physical relaxation, the surrounding countryside reminded him a great deal of Norway and affected him psychologically.<sup>4</sup> Thuringia made him homesick for Norway, but at the same time, the terrible memories of his previous experiences there prevented him from returning. He wrote to his aunt of his desire to return to Norway and also explained the reasons that kept him away:

It is rather sad that I cannot visit my idyllic home in Aasgaardstrand but when I think about all the uncomfortable situations I get into when I am there then I think I had better stay where I am in a foreign country.<sup>5</sup>

In 1907, Munch travelled to Warnemunde and stayed for a year because the countryside reminded him of his own country. After his return to Germany, he once again complained about his mental state, and wrote to his aunt that he was searching for a quiet place where he could get some relaxation:

I must find a place where I can stay for a year in complete country quiet, in order to get my nerves in shape again.<sup>6</sup>

He also emphasized that all his previous experiences and his constant travelling had made him more of a recluse and more afraid of people:

By the way I see almost no one; a shyness of people is the result of the old story.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of 1907, Munch once again travelled to Warnemunde and then to Sweden. On his return to Germany, he finally decided to move back to Norway. On his return he spent some time with an old friend of his, the writer Sigurd Mathiesson, with whom he went on a four day drinking spree. By the end of the four days he was in a state of physical and mental collapse and he suffered a severe nervous breakdown. As a result, he decided to commit himself to a psychiatric clinic where he would receive proper treatment. He committed himself to Dr. Jakobsen's private clinic in Copenhagen where he remained for nine months. From the hospital he wrote to his aunt and explained that he was glad that finally he would

be receiving proper treatment and emphasized that he should have done so after the fatal incident with his mistress:

I have had myself admitted to a nerves sanatorium. I hope that here I will find a cure for the unbearable inner turmoil which I have suffered from since that story. I should have done this a long time ago, then I would have saved myself and you and many others a lot of unpleasantness. When you think of what I went through those days, along with the other persecutions it is quite reasonable that the nervous system be shattered.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The great turmoil and instability that Munch experienced after 1902 not only affected his physical and mental stability, but had also crucial effects on his art work. After the 1902 Blomqvist Exhibition, where he exhibited the Frieze of Life as a complete series, Munch ceased all work on themes which were associated with the Frieze's philosophical issues concerning life, love and death. The basic reason for this discontinuation was the fact that the primary issues of the Frieze were closely influenced by his personal experiences. At that time, Munch wanted to forget all his past experiences and thus avoid any personal involvement in his works which would bring back memories from the past.

After 1902, Munch painted works which had objective themes. He painted mainly commissioned works, which were either portraits of the patron's family, Four Sons of Max Linde, 1903 (Fig. 25), Portrait of Dr. Max Linde, 1902, or

scenes of the patron's estates, Dr. Max Linde's House, 1903. He painted numerous landscapes, such as Avenue in Snow Koesen, 1906 and Harbour of Lubeck, 1907 (Fig. 26), which show that his art work was now concerned not with the individual and his feelings, but with things that he saw in nature. He also painted a number of works which have woman as a central theme, Brunette and Blonde, 1903 and Female Nudes with Red Carpet, 1903 (Fig. 27). But the execution and content of these works differ exceedingly from the Frieze's works, which also have woman as their central theme. In the Frieze's works, Munch primarily concentrated on the content of the work; on the various aspects of woman and how they relate to life, love and death. In the paintings of women that he painted after 1902, he is primarily concerned with the form of the figure - the nude. He painted nudes to show the sensuality of women as it is expressed through their forms which Munch rendered in fluid strokes and vivid colors.

## CHAPTER III NOTES

1

At that time Munch wrote to his aunt and explained the situation that he was facing, and the effects that this woman had on him and his work. He explained:  
"In Kristiania I met so many of the confreres of that 'woman' that I just get angry as it is best to by pass it.....  
That miserable woman has also managed to destroy my peace and taken the pleasure out of the success I have achieved." Inger E. Munch, Edvard Munchs Brev Familien (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1949), Letters 229, 230, written at Aasgaardstrand on 21,11,1904.

2

Ibid, Letter 234.

3

Ibid, Letters 231, 235.

4

In a letter to his aunt, Munch explained that, "the beautiful mountain scenery reminds me of Norway.....it has (also) the advantage that there are no Norwegians with in miles". Inger E. Munch, Edvard Munchs Brev Familien, Letter 249, written on 8,3,1906.

5

Ibid, Letter 266.

6

Ibid, Letter 267.

7

Ibid, Letter 266.

8

Ibid, Letter 270.

CHAPTER IV  
THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE  
ALPHA AND OMEGA CYCLE

During his hospitalization, Munch made several portraits of the hospital staff and of his friends who visited him. He also made minor drawings of the animals that he saw during his visits to the Copenhagen Zoo. But the most significant work that he executed, which is closely related to his psychiatric treatments and his recovery is a poem that he wrote, entitled Alpha and Omega, and illustrated with twenty-two lithographs. The poem's narrative plot concentrates on the relationship between the first man and woman, Alpha and Omega, and their lives on earth. It begins with their initial acquaintance and ends with each of the couple's death. The main issues of the poem's plot and the basic stylistic characteristic of the lithographs closely associate the Alpha and Omega cycle with the works and themes of the Frieze of Life series.

The origin and significance of the Alpha and Omega series is initially somewhat vague and confusing. A comprehensive study of the Alpha and Omega series has been completely ignored by the historians who have written on Munch's work. Seldom, if at all, does one find a casual description of the series in the literature on Munch. Only Gustav Schiefler<sup>1</sup> and Werner Timm<sup>2</sup> deal with the Alpha and

Omega series in an analytical manner.

Schiefler gives a condensed description of the poems' lithographs. Yet his overall criticism of the narrative plot of the series is short and unsatisfactory. He simply states that the theme of the poem concentrates on the unfaithfulness of women: "the series presents the unfaithfulness of woman, as painted by the imagination of the artist."<sup>3</sup>

Timm devotes a whole chapter to the series, under headings which describe it as "satire and caricature". He sees the series as been one of Munch's most pessimistic works, which demonstrates his detachment from the theme of the series. He explains that Munch's detachment from and satirical allusions to the story of the poem indicate that he could now deal with the basic issues of the Frieze of Life and with past experiences, without getting personally involved. He explains Munch's detachment to this work in his description of the affinities between the Frieze of Life and the Alpha and Omega series:

Its roots being buried in his earliest experiences of life. It must, however, not be overlooked that the actual events are treated here in a manner of a parable showing his greatest detachment. Behind the satirical allusion to the first human couple, lies the suggestion of a summation of basic experiences. To a large extent these very experiences had previously been important motifs in his pictures; love and jealousy, the faithfulness of woman, melancholia, anxiety and death. The subjects of this series are linked with the rest of his creation through close iconographic relationship and even through an inner continuity.<sup>4</sup>

Other art historians associate the Alpha and Omega series with Munch's mental breakdown or refer to it as a satire or a very funny work. Arve Moen relates the series to Munch's mental recovery, by dramatizing the seriousness of his illness. She explains that in the poem:

Lies the key to his self-analysis, yet there is reason to believe that it will never be entirely understood by an outsider. The artist himself regarded the poem at the same time as a settlement and an escape out of his crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Moen compared the series to Munch's other works which have love and woman as a central theme: "a symbolic fable (which) crowns that part of Munch's work which had woman and love as its central theme."<sup>6</sup> Stenersen also related the poem to Munch's mental crisis by emphasizing that "the poem Alpha and Omega reflects the mental and spiritual problems confronting him".<sup>7</sup> and that it is a very significant work, because "only when he wrote the poem he revealed himself as fully as in his pictures."<sup>8</sup> Deknatel explained that Munch's intention in the series was to tell the story of man and woman both in fun and in earnest, in order to approach it "with sufficient detachment and permit a note of ironic self-ridicule."<sup>9</sup> Selz also implied that the series was a very funny work and "a rather surprising work to come from the hands of an artist so little inclined towards humour."<sup>10</sup>

These interpretations of the significance of the Alpha and Omega series are quite misleading. Munch's intention in the cycle was not to create a series of works

which would make the reader or the viewer laugh about the relationships between man and woman. In the series, Munch wanted to recreate his whole philosophy on life, love and death as he had conceived of it before 1902, and had represented it in the works of the Frieze of Life series.

The development of the Alpha and Omega series originated partly from his hospitalization and the psychiatric treatments that he received which enabled him to recover from his crisis. Munch's illness has been characterized as being full "of anxiety, severe agoraphobia and ideas of persecution."<sup>11</sup> He was also described as having a "neurotic or schizoid personality."<sup>12</sup> At first, his doctor decided to treat Munch through hot electrical baths and electrical shocks. Munch, in his letters to his aunt, described the various treatments that he was receiving:

Dear Aunt:

I had better tell you a little about my life here. It is of course very different from my usual. At first, I stayed in bed for a long time and then little by little the different treatments, baths - baths and an extract of pine needles and electric baths that work very well. After breakfast I have had air treatments. I get wrapped up and laid at an open window.<sup>13</sup>

A drawing that he made at the hospital, At Dr. Jakobsen's Clinic, 1908 (Fig. 28) depicts Munch receiving electrical treatments. The drawing represents Munch seated near a table on which two electrical apparatus are placed. A nurse, standing near Munch is holding wire leading from one of those apparatus and is handing it to the doctor who is

applying it to the top of Munch's head. At the top of the drawing, Munch wrote:

Professor Jakobsen is electrifying the famous painter, Munch, and is bringing a positive masculine force and a negative feminine force in his fragile brain.<sup>14</sup>

From Munch's description of his treatments, one would think that his doctor's approach was based simply on the use of electric treatments and on the idea of physical relaxation. But his treatments included more than that; his doctor was a brilliant man who was conscious of his patients' need for understanding. He spent most of his time chatting with his patients in order to comprehend their problems. Dr. Jakobsen encouraged Munch to continue his art work. He knew that this would relax his patient more. Munch himself emphasized the need to continue his art.

Even during the period of my greatest depression, a strange and soothing peace came over me when I painted, as if everything evil let go of me the moment I started.<sup>15</sup>

He painted a number of the hospital staff; Portrait of Dr. Jakobsen, 1908 (Fig. 29) and The Nurse, 1908 (Fig. 30), and of sick patients; Melancholia - The Insane Woman, 1908 (Fig. 31). These works show the affection he felt for the hospital staff and his concern and understanding for a sick woman's situation. He also made numerous drawings of animals from his visits to the Copenhagen Zoo, which he later used in various scenes of the Alpha and Omega series. The subject matter of these works indicate that Munch was not

concerned with his inner feelings or anxieties, but rather painted the people and things that he was coming in contact with.

As Munch's recovery progressed, the Doctor once again encouraged him to carry out his plans for a series of works which would deal with his memories of past experiences. The Doctor believed that this work would not harm Munch, but rather enable him to reveal his problems and also release him from his inner anxieties. Reinhold Heller argues that the conception and origin of the Alpha and Omega series completely originated from the Doctor's approach to therapeutic treatments. He emphasized that:

A common therapeutic practice is to have the patient depict his neurosis as though they were actually occurring and thereby to bring them under control. It was a practice already used in 1908 by Munch's doctor in Copenhagen and the result was the series of lithographs of Alpha and Omega.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Heller's theory is quite misleading. A drawing done by Munch in 1896, The Death of Omega (Fig. 32), which has the same subject matter and quite similar iconographic elements as the lithograph, Omega's Death, 1909 (Fig. 52), From the Alpha and Omega cycle, proves that Munch must have conceived of the series long before his hospitalization. Nevertheless, it was not until his hospitalization that he decided to execute the whole series, because up to that time he had tried to avoid any confrontation with his past experiences.

The subject matter of the Alpha and Omega series,

as well as the theme of another work, The Rag and Bone Man or The Wanderer, 1908 (Fig. 33) which was also made during his hospitalization, stand apart from the other works done at the same time, as his most personal and fundamental works. The theme of the Wanderer was as a disguised representation of Munch himself and how he thought he had spent his time before his hospitalization. This work depicts the artist in the foreground of a narrow city street, through which he aimlessly wanders, carrying with him the heavy burden of all his past experiences. In the Wanderer, as well as the Alpha and Omega cycle, Munch symbolically expresses his inner thoughts and anxieties, as he tries to bring them under control.

\* \* \* \* \*

The narrative plot of the Alpha and Omega is partly associated with the christian fable of the first human couple on earth - the story of Adam and Eve. The story describes the couple's first acquaintance, their attraction, their sexual union and their happy days together on an island filled with animals and flowers. But this idyllic period was followed by anguish and anger because of the woman's unfaithfulness which resulted in numerous love affairs with the animals on the island. All these love affairs take place directly before the man, who endures a

everything because of his love for the woman. He often forgave the woman and took her back, until she decided to leave him and travel to another island, on the back of one of the animals. Once the man is rejected and left alone on the island, he is filled with pain, loneliness and despair. He can not cope with the rejection, nor with the woman's many offspring who demand attention from him. When the woman finally decided to return to the man, he has no more mercy for her and, driven by great anger, he kills her. But in return, he is killed by the woman's offspring, who are half-man, half-animal, in their desire to seek vengeance for their mother's death.

Munch originally wrote the poem both in Norwegian and French. The poem read as follows:

Alpha and Omega were the first humans on the island. Alpha, lying on the grass, had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Omega came close to him and saw him, and was filled with curiosity. Omega picked a branch of fern, tickled him and awakened him. Alpha loved Omega; in the evening they would sit by each other looking at the column of moonlight trembling on the sea which surrounded the island. They went deep into the forest, and in the forest there were many animals and strange plants; the place was dark and mysterious, but there were many lovely little flowers. Once (Omega) got frightened and hid suddenly in the arms of Alpha. On many days the island was bathed in sunshine.

One day, Omega was lying outside the wood while Alpha was sitting farther away in the shadow of the forest. A huge cloud rose from the ocean, spread over the sky and covered the island with shadow. Alpha called Omega, but Omega did not hear. Alpha saw that Omega held in her hands the head of an enormous serpent, which had slid from under the ferns along her body; she looked at its glittering eyes. Suddenly rain began to

fall, and Alpha and Omega were terrified.

One day, when Alpha met the serpent in the field, he fought with it and killed it as Omega looked on from a distance. One day she met a bear; Omega trembled when she felt the soft skin of the bear against her body. When she put her arms around its neck, the arm disappeared in the fur. Omega meets a poet-hyena who had scraggly fur; her usual affectionate words do not touch him. With her small soft hands she made a laurel wreath and, bringing her sweet face close to his grumpy face, she crowned him.

A tiger bent his fierce, cruel head over the head of Omega. Omega did not tremble. She put her small hand between the jaws on the tiger and caressed his teeth. When the tiger met the bear, he smelled Omega's scent - the perfume of the pale apple blossom which Omega kissed every morning at sunrise. They fought and tore each other to pieces. All of a sudden as if on a checkerboard - which hadn't been invented yet - the pieces changed. Other animals stretch their necks and observe the game.

The eyes of Omega were changeable; normally they were light blue. But when she looked at her lovers, her eyes turned black with traces of carmine-red, and at such moments she used to hide her mouth behind a flower. The heart of Omega was fickle. One day Alpha saw her sitting near the river kissing a donkey lying at her knees. Then Alpha went to get on ostrich and leaned against its neck, but Omega, busy with her favourite pastime, kissing, did not look up. Omega felt tired and unhappy that she couldn't embrace all the animals of the island. She sat on the grass in tears. Then she stood up, wandered about the island, and met a pig. She knelt down, hiding her body in her long black hair, and she and the pig looked at each other. But Omega got bored. One night when the golden column of the moon trembled on the water, she fled on the back of a roebuck over the sea to the pale green land under the moon. Alpha stayed on the island alone.

One day, the children of Omega came to him; a new generation had grown up on the island. They gathered around Alpha and called him their father. They were little pigs, little snakes, little monkeys, little wild animals, and other bastards of man. He was in despair. He ran along the sea. The sky and water were the color of blood. He heard shrieks in the air and covered his ears. The

earth, the sky, and the sea trembled and he felt a great anguish. One day the roebuck brought Omega back. Alpha was sitting on the beach and she came toward him. Alpha felt his blood beating, his muscles swelled, and he struck Omega so hard that she died. When he leaned over the body and saw her face, he was terrified by its expression. It was the very same that she had had in the forest when he loved her most. While he was still looking at her, he was attacked from behind by all his children and the animals of the island who tore him to pieces. The new generation filled the island.<sup>17</sup>

The illustrative material consisted of three vignettes and eighteen lithographs. A description of the relationship between the lithographs and the poem is given in the Appendix A.

In the Alpha and Omega series Munch once again deals with two of the primary issues in the Frieze of Life series; the relationship between man and woman and the aspects of life and death. In the poem's love story of the first couple on earth, Alpha and Omega, and through their symbolic names which signify the beginning and the end, Munch recreates his whole philosophy on life, love and death. As in the Frieze of Life, he redeveloped his philosophy on the issue of the love between the couple and how it evolved through the various stages of: attraction, biological union, jealousy, separation, melancholy, despair and finally death. The second issue which deals with the aspects of life and death was associated with the biological union between the man, the woman and the animals, which brought forth life - the offspring - who continue the biological evolution of man.

The Alpha and Omega series is also Munch's summation of all his past relationships with women and his final attack on the woman's sexual role in life. He wanted to emphasize woman's feebleness and her great unfaithfulness which result in man's fall.

The Alpha and Omega love story begins with the couple's first acquaintance, as it is portrayed in the scene of Alpha and Omega (Fig. 36). Here, instead of having the couple meet in a midsummers night setting, as he had first conceived of the initial acquaintance in the theme of Attraction (Fig. 14), he depicts the man lying, sleeping and the woman, who has obviously been awakened by her sexual desires, curiously approaching the man and awaking him with the tip of a fern frond. The man, unaware of the woman's true nature, falls in love with her and sits by her side, in front of the sea shore, The Rising Moon (Fig. 37). The theme of Attraction is extended in this scene of The Rising Moon. Although the iconographic formalities in this scene vary somewhat from the original version, the basic symbolic elements of the sea shore and the phallic image of the moon which symbolically represents the biological union between man and woman, have been again included.

In the scene To The Forest (Fig. 38), which depicts the couple entering the forest, Munch recreates the original theme of To The Forest (Fig. 16), as he initially conceived of it in the Frieze of Life series. He includes this theme

in the Alpha and Omega in order to imply the biological unity of the couple as it takes place within the natural surroundings of the forest and animals.

In the scene of Shadows (Fig. 39) Munch deals with the theme of Jealousy (Fig. 20) as he represented in the Frieze of Life. Shadows depicts the woman cuddling the snake as the man watches from within the forest. In this scene, he uses the same iconographic imagery for the portrayal of the rejected lover as is in the original version of Jealousy. In the original version, he portrayed the defeated lover in a frontal pose in one of the lower corners of the painting, looking out to the viewer. The man is therefore separated from the sensual couple at the back. In Shadows, the defeated lover is again portrayed in a frontal position, at the upper left corner of the painting, separated from the woman and the snake by the horizontal lines of the trees in which he is enclosed.

The various erotic scenes which represent the woman having her numerous love affairs with the animals on the island, differ iconographically from the works of the Frieze of Life. In most of the Alpha and Omega erotic scenes, Munch concentrates on simple depictions of erotic acts between the woman and the animals. For example, in the scenes of The Bear (Fig. 41) and The Tiger (Fig. 42), he deals with the erotic theme of The Kiss (Fig. 15) as he represents the woman passionately kissing the animals. He

also deals with the rivalry of the lovers, The Tiger and the Bear as they quarrel over the woman and tear each other to pieces.

In the scenes Omega and the Flowers (Fig. 44), Omega's Eyes (Fig. 45), Omega Weeps (Fig. 48), and in the vignette The Poisonous Flower (Fig. 35) Munch once again elaborates on the woman's various aspects. In Omega and the Flower he portrays the woman as a virgin - a pure woman - who has awakened by her sexual desires and clings to the flowers which symbolically represent love.<sup>18</sup> In Omega's Eyes, he deals with the second stage of woman - temptress and the sexual partner of man. In this scene, he redevelops the theme of Vampire (Fig. 17), the sensual woman, who, driven by her sexual desires, sucks up man's energy. In the part of the poem which describes this scene, Munch points out how the woman's eyes used to change in accordance with her inner sexual desires: "But when she looked at her lovers, her eyes turned black with traces of carmine-red and at such moments she used to hide her mouth behind a flower." Omega sucks the flower with her lips, as the vampire woman sucks the man's neck in Vampire. In Omega Weeps, Munch restates the theme of the mother-widow, the rejected woman, who stands apart and weeps. Here, Omega has lost all her previous beauty and is portrayed as rather old and withered. The theme of the three aspects of woman is again stated in the vignette The Poisonous Flower, which iconographically resembles the trichephalous image of the Symbolic Study

(Fig. 11). Here Munch represents the three aspects of woman; the virgin, the temptress and the mother-widow.

In the scene of Omega's Flight (Fig. 49), Munch reconstructs in a similar iconographic format, the theme of Melancholy (Fig. 19) as he had initially conceived of it in 1891. As in the original version of Melancholy, Alpha, the man, has been rejected by the woman, for another lover; in this story for the deer, and is left behind, alone, on the island. The melancholic figure of the man, who has been overcome by sadness and loneliness, is represented on the shore, in a contemplative pose, with his back turned away from the woman who rides on the back of her lover, the deer.

In the scene of Alpha's Progeny (Fig. 50), the man is filled with anger and anxiety; he is unable to cope with his loneliness and most of all, with the woman's responsibilities; in this case, her offspring, who try to cling to him, calling him father. The theme of Despair (Fig. 51) is here recreated according to the original version of The Scream (Fig. 22), which portray a man in ultimate anguish. In Despair, the man is represented full size and naked, but the over all effect of the scene is similar to the original version of The Scream. In Despair, the man is represented again, in front of the sea shore, against a background marred by striations. The man's face is similar to the original mask-like expression of the image in The Scream, who has his hands over his ears to shut out the screams of nature, which are no more than

the echoes coming from within him. Also, the part of the poem which describes the scene of Despair is similar to the description that Munch gave in which he explained the events that had inspired the theme of the scream.<sup>19</sup> In the poem he wrote:

Sky and water were the color of blood.  
He heard the shrieks in the air and covered  
his ears. The earth, the sky, and the sea  
trembled and he felt a great anguish.

In the scene of Omega's Death (Fig. 52), Munch represents Omega's murder after her return to the island. He portrays the man, driven by anger, kneeling over the woman and strangling her to death. In Alpha's Death (Fig. 53), he depicts the man as he is attacked and killed by the half-man, half-animal creatures - the woman's offspring who seek revenge for their mother's death.

Throughout the Alpha and Omega series, Munch places a great emphasis on woman's nature and the great control that she has over man. In the Title Vignette (Fig. 34), he symbolically portray man as he is engulfed in a woman's long flowing hair and is suffocated by her grasp. He used the same symbolism of hair to show the obliteration of man as he used in the scenes of Attraction (Fig. 14) and Separation (Fig. 21) in the Frieze of Life. Through the symbolism of The Poisonous Flower, he again stated the dangerous, poisonous nature of woman, who aims to destroy and kill man. In the story of Alpha and Omega he emphasized man's faithfulness and love for the woman; his great concern for her and his

desire to protect her from evil that he risks his life to battle and destroy it, The Snake is Strangled (Fig. 40). But Munch explains that nothing can prevent woman from exposing her true nature, which is feeble and unfaithful. He concludes that "even if a man travels to a deserted island with his woman, he has no way of trusting her."<sup>20</sup> If there are no other men around, she will submit to and have love affairs with the animals on the island.

In the Alpha and Omega series, Munch redeveloped the Frieze's basic issues in order to reevaluate his philosophy on the relationships between man and woman. In the Frieze of Life, Munch concluded the love cycle with the theme of The Scream, which portrays man's ultimate despair. The Scream signified man's fall which is caused by woman. Thus, the concluding part of the Frieze's narrative plot of love left woman as the sole victor over man and nature. In the Alpha and Omega series, Munch develops the love story one step further, by concentrating on the theme of revenge, which in turn brings a dramatic end to both the man and the woman.

In Alpha and Omega, instead of concluding the love story with man's mental and physical deterioration he concentrates on the man's anger which has been created by the woman's unfaithfulness. Instead of letting the woman have her way, Munch elaborates on the moral aspects of puritan revenge which preaches "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a

tooth." So, in his desire to seek vengeance on woman for the pain that she has given man, he desires to kill woman and destroy her forever. He believed that only through this act of vengeance could man reaffirm his pride and continue his existence. However, he was aware that this vengeance was just as temporary as a human being's life on earth. He was aware that the physical laws of nature are primarily concerned with the evolution of life, and are stronger than the relationship between man and woman. Thus, after the woman's death, Munch sought to bring an end to man's life, in order to complete the cycle of love and life between the couple.

Through the final act of the series, which illustrates the man's death caused by the woman's offspring, Munch once again elaborates on the Frieze's second issue of life and death. In the final act, the woman's offspring kill the man, in their desire to seek vengeance for their mother's death. Thus, nothing remains of the couple except the woman's offspring from her various copulations with the different animals on the island, who remain to continue life. But through this final act of man's death, Munch also wanted to emphasize that the woman still remains the sole victor, who even after her death is represented in life by her offspring. Thus, in the end, the man was once again the loser, who after his death had nothing to leave behind, which would indicate the love and life that he had experienced on earth.

Therefore, the Alpha and Omega series is not a

satirical or a comical work. The series is associated with Munch's mental illness and his final recovery. The two last scenes of the series which deal with the couple's death, were used by Munch as a final catharsis from his mental illness. The woman's death signified his final vengeance on woman as well as a summation of all his experiences with women. In turn, the man's death indicate his rational approach on the aspect of revenge on which he based all his hatred of woman. Through the man's death, he shows the eventual destiny of man, after the woman's death. He emphasizes that there is no more life left for man, after the woman dies. Thus, he kills the man and ends the cycle of love and life between the couple. In fact, the couple is no longer significant of life, since the woman's offspring remain to continue the evolution of life.

After the completion of the Alpha and Omega cycle, and after his recovery, Munch returned to Norway and lived as a recluse at his summer home at Aasgaardstrand, until his death. He never again painted works which were thematically or iconographically related to the Frieze of Life. Indeed, the final conclusion of the Alpha and Omega series had summarized all his past experience and preoccupation with philosophical issues of life, love and death, and had acted as a catharsis for all the frustration and anxiety which had caused his mental illness.

## CHAPTER IV NOTES

- 1  
Gustav Schiefler, Edvard Munch Das Graphische Werk, 1906-1926 (Berlin: Euphorian, 1928), pp. 59-62.
- 2  
Werner Timm, The Graphic Art of Edvard Munch (New York: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973), pp. 74-75.
- 3  
Gustav Schiefler, Edvard Munch, Das Graphische Werk, 1906-1926, p. 59.
- 4  
Werner Timm, The Graphic Art of Edvard Munch, p. 75.
- 5  
Arve Moen, Edvard Munch: Woman and Eros (Oslo: Forlaget Norsh Kunstproduksjon, 1957), p. 26.
- 6  
Ibid., p. 27.
- 7  
Ralph Stenersen, Edvard Munch: Close-Up of a Genius (Oslo: Cyldendal Norsk forlag, 1972), p. 31.
- 8  
Ibid., p. 149.
- 9  
Frederick B. Deknatel, Edvard Munch. (New York: Chanticleer Press Inc., 1950), p. 49.
- 10  
Jean Selz. Edvard Munch (New York: Crown Publishing Inc., 1974), p. 68.
- 11  
Stanley Steinberg and Joseph Weiss, "The Art of Edvard Munch and Its Function in his Mental Life", The Psychoanalytical Quarterly, 23/3 (1954), p. 43.
- 12  
Reinhold Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream (London: Penguin Press, 1973), p. 91.
- 13  
Inger E. Munch, Edvard Munchs Brev Familien, (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1949), Letter 272.

## CHAPTER IV NOTES (cont'd)

14

Jean Selz, Edvard Munch, p.68.

15

Inger E. Munch, Edvard Munchs Brev Familien, Letter 273.

16

Reinhold Heller, Edvard Munch: The Scream, p.89.

17

Reinhold Heller, "Edvard Munch and the Clarification of Life", Oberlin College Bulletin, 29/3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 183-7.

18

Reinhold Heller argues that in Munch's work, the plant symbolizes the "Plant of Art". In his article "The Iconography of Edvard Munch's Sphinx" Artforum, 9, (October, 1970), pp.77-8, he emphasized that: "The plant Munch described as filled with the heart's blood of the artist the plant growing in the present, rooted in the past, appearing for the future the product of the artist's melancholy contemplation of life." I somehow refute the validity of this theory because in Munch's work, the plant was primarily associated with life and death works, in that once the human corpse had dissolved in the ground, life sprang forth, in the form of either a plant or a tree. Since life and death were directly associated with love which brought forth life and since in the story of Alpha and Omega, Omega's nature is interrelated so much with the animals and the plants, it is fair to suffice that the plant here acquires the symbolic imagery of a desired love. Also the flower of love was used in the work The Dance of Life in which Munch places the flower of love between the virgin female and the erotic couple. Yet, Heller's theory that the flower symbolizes the artist is correct in that Munch associated his art work with his life and personal experiences.

19

"One evening I was walking along the path in one side lay the city and below me the fjord. I was tired and ill. I stopped and looked across the fjord. The sun was setting; the clouds were dyed red-like blood. I felt a scream pass through nature; it seemed to me that I could hear the scream. I painted the picture, painted the clouds as red blood. The colors were screaming." Johan H. Langaard and Reidar Revold, Edvard Munch (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), p. 53.

20

Ralph Stenersen, Edvard Munch: Close-Up of a Genius, p. 31.

## CONCLUSION

The Alpha and Omega cycle is thematically and iconographically related to Munch's most significant work.- The Frieze of Life series. In both these series, Munch was primarily concerned with two basic philosophical issues: the relationship between man and woman, and the aspects of life and death as they were developed from his personal experience.

In the Frieze of Life, he dealt with the relationship and love between man and woman, which eventually reached the stage of ultimate despair for man because of the woman's feebleness and unfaithfulness. The only positive aspect of the couple's relationship, Munch felt, was their biological union which brought forth life - the offspring - who continue life. In the Alpha and Omega series he redeveloped the Frieze's narrative plot of love, until the stage of despair. But here, instead of having the man reach a physical and mental deterioration, he concentrated on the aspect of revenge, which results in the couple's death. With their death, he concluded the cycle of love and life between the couple. Still, he emphasized that the woman's offspring will remain on earth, to continue the cycle of life.

These two final acts of the series acted as a final catharsis for Munch's frustrations and anxieties. Through the woman's death, he was able to get his revenge on woman and

and finally deal with his hatred for woman. By the man's death, he showed that there was no life left for man after the woman's death. Thus, after the completion of the series and after his recovery, Munch never again painted works which were associated with the philosophical issues of the Frieze of Life series. Also, after his recovery, he never again had any personal involvements with women and he never again mentioned any of his past experiences with women.

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## APPENDIX A

A description of the relationship between the lithographs and the poem:

1. Title Vignette:

This depicts a man's head surrounded by locks of hair. The man has raised eyebrows, inwardly turned pupils and the corners of his mouth turn downwards. Above the head is placed the title of the poem; 'Alpha and Omega'.

2. Table of Contents:

This sheet consists of the titles of the eighteen principal sheets. It is decorated by ornamental borders. Munch also included two human faces situated at the left and right bottom corners. The face at the left side is laughing, the face at the right is in agony.

3. Vignette - Satyr:

This depicts a satyr's head with matted hair and beard. From its forehead grow, like cuckold's horns, two clenched fists.

4. Vignette - The Poisonous Flower:

This vignette consists of a flower whose stem, with downward hanging leaves, grows from root. Instead of a flower, it bears three women's heads. The heads are of a young, middle aged and an old woman.

5. Alpha and Omega:

This scene depicts the man lying on the ground, sleeping. Beside him stands, half crouching, a

woman who is trying to tickle him awake on his cheek with a twig of fern. In the background lies a hilly landscape.

This scene relates to the part of the poem which deals with the first encounter of the couple:  
 "Alpha and Omega were the first humans on the island. Alpha, lying on the grass, had fallen asleep and was dreaming. Omega came close to him, saw him, and was filled with curiosity. Omega picked a branch of fern tickled him, and awakened him."

#### 6. The Rising Moon:

This scene depicts the couple, clinging on to each other, naked, seen from behind, sitting on a high river bank. The man is to the left, the woman to the right. The view is of a sea bay bordered on the other side by a bank in which the rising moon is reflected.

This illustrates the part of the poem which described the unity and love between the couple:  
 "Alpha loved Omega; in the evening they would sit close to each other looking at the column of moonlight trembling on the sea which surrounded the island."

#### 7. To The Forest:

The scene depicts the couple from behind, walking into a dense forest.

This also illustrates part of the poem's description of the unity and love between the couple which takes place within the mysterious surroundings of nature; the forest: "They went into deep forest, and in the forest there were many animals and plants; the place was dark and mysterious.....on many days the island was bathed in sunshine."

#### 8. The Shadow:

This scene depicts the man, woman, and snake. In the middle of the picture the woman lies full length on the ground. She caresses the snake which lies over her body. Near the left edge of the picture is the man, looking forth from the dark of the dense forest. His chin rests in his hands on arms propped

on the ground. Behind the woman and the snake lies the sea, and on the edge of the other side of the sea, lies the forest. To the right a black storm cloud rises over the forest.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which described the betrayal of woman and the intruder which comes between them: "One day, Omega was lying outside the wood while Alpha was sitting farther away in the shadow of the forest. A huge cloud rose from the ocean, spread over the sky, and covered the island with its shadow. Alpha called Omega, but Omega did not hear. Alpha saw that Omega held in her hands the head of an enormous serpent, which had slid from under the ferns along her body; she looked at its glittering eyes. Suddenly rain began to fall, and Alpha and Omega were terrified."

#### 9. The Snake is Strangled:

This scene deals with the battle between the man and the snake. The man is shown entangled with the snake, seizing it around the neck. The woman lies in the background, at the left, on her stomach with her hands propped up, watching.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which described the battle between the two rivals, the man and the snake, as the woman watches from far away: "One day when Alpha met the serpent in the field, he fought with it and killed it, as Omega looked on from the distance."

#### 10. The Bear:

On the same sheet, there is a double representation of Omega, being busily involved with two animals. At the left, she crowns a hyena with a laurel wreath, and at the right, she kneels and embraces a bear.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes Omega's affair with the bear: "One day she met the bear; Omega trembled when she felt the soft skin of the bear against her body. When she put her arms around its neck the arm disappeared in the fur." It also describes Omega's acquaintance with the hyena. "Omega meets a poet-hyena who had

scraggly fur; her usual affectionate words do not touch him. With her small soft hands she made a laurel wreath and bringing her sweet face close to his grumpy face, she crowns him."

#### 11. The Tiger:

The scene depicts the upper body of Omega lying down. The head of the tiger is over her. Its right forepaw is lying under Omega's neck. Omega caresses the tiger's muzzle with her right hand.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which represents Omega and the tiger embracing: "The tiger bent his fierce cruel head over the head of Omega. Omega did not tremble. She put her small hand between the jaws of the tiger and caressed his teeth."

#### 12. The Tiger and the Bear:

The scene depicts the dark bear at the left, seen from the side, going to the right. To the right is the light tiger, seen from the side, going to the left. The animals walk towards each other ready to battle. In the background in light lines is depicted the couple, Alpha and Omega, holding on to each other, surrounded by a giraffe, a lion, and an ostrich, standing before a light drawn forest, watching the battle.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes the battle between the woman's two rivals, the bear and the tiger: "When the tiger met the bear, he smelled Omega's scent - the perfume of the pale apple blossom which Omega kissed every morning at sunshine. They fought and tore each other to pieces.....Omega nestled close to Alpha; curious and not understanding, the other animals stretch their necks and observe the game."

#### 13. Omega and the Flowers:

The scene depicts the woman alone, kneeling; her legs turned somewhat to the left, her upper body erect. She presses flowers to her mouth.

14. Omega's Eyes:

The scene depicts the half upper part of the woman, seen from the front. Her eyes are wide open and staring to the distance. She is pressing flowers to her lips.

The above two scenes illustrate the part of the poem which describes the feeble nature of woman, characterizing woman as changeable as is nature: "The Eyes of Omega were changeable; normally they were light blue. But when she looked at her lovers, her eyes turned black with traces of carmine-red and at such moments she used to hide her mouth behind a flower.

15. Omega and the Donkey:

The scene depicts the woman kneeling, seen from the side, towards the right on the ground. She is seen kissing a donkey which lies in front of her, whose nose is stretched toward her mouth, as she holds its head in her hands. The man is depicted in light tones in the background with an ostrich. In the background stretches the forest.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes Omega's affair with the donkey, while Alpha sees her from afar. The woman who is busy kissing, does not even notice the man: "The heart of Omega was fickle. One day Alpha saw her sitting near the river kissing a donkey lying at her knees. Then Alpha went to get the ostrich and leaned against its neck, but Omega, busy with her favorite pastime, kissing, did not look up."

16. Omega and the Pig:

This scene depicts the woman kneeling holding her long hanging hair forward to cover her body, while looking sensually at the fat pig sitting on the right. The pig looks equally sensually back at her. Behind these two figures stands a pile of wood. At the distance at the left, a hut can be seen in front of the water. Behind the hut stands the forest and sloping mountains.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes the woman's flirting with the pig: "Then she stood up, wandering about the island, and met

the pig. She knelt down, hid her body in her long black hair, and she and the pig looked at each other."

17. Omega Weeps:

This scene depicts the woman in full figure kneeling. She is seen from the front, her knees turned a little bit to the right. She has an unpleasant look on her face, her hair hanging, tangled and uncombed on both sides of her face. She has thick hanging breasts and a bloated stomach. Her hands hang down, stocked at her sides.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes Omega's boredom and unhappiness: "Omega felt tired and unhappy that she couldn't embrace all the animals of the island. She sat on the grass in tears."

18. Omega's Escape:

This scene depicts the man at the left sitting on a stone in front of the sea shore. He is seen from the side, facing right. He has his elbows on his knees and his face rests on his hands. The beach stretches in front of him in a shape of a curve enclosing a large bay of the sea in the background. In the water is a deer, on whose back the woman lies. The moon is reflected on the water.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes Omega's flight: "But Omega got bored. One night when the golden column of the moon trembled on the water, she fled on the back of a roebuck over the sea on the pale green light under the moon. Alpha stayed on the island alone."

19. Alpha's Progeny:

This scene depicts the man sitting on a stone. He is almost seen completely from the side, turned to the right, his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. Behind him lies the edge of the sea shore. Ahead of him rises the land, with a hut seen in the distance in front of the forest. In front of the man a long line of creatures, half-man, half-animal, with the bodies of animals and the heads of humans, stand looking at the man.

The scene illustrates the part of the poem which deals with Omega's progeny as they approach and call to the man, to protect them: "One day, the children of Omega came to him; a new generation had grown up on the island. They gather around Alpha and call him their father. They were little pigs, little snakes, little monkeys, little wild animals and other bastards of man."

20. Despair:

This scene depicts the man, standing right with his legs slightly apart, turned towards the viewer, in front of the sea shore. The man is gripping his head with both of his hands, throwing his hands upward, and with his round, wide-open mouth, he seems to be uttering a scream. The sea shore stretches in a curve, forming a bay. The sea, sky, earth and figure of the man are formed by a number of striations.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes the man's ultimate despair: "He was in despair. He ran along the sea. Sky and water were the color of blood. He heard shrieks in the air and covered his ears. The earth, the sky and the sea trembled and he felt a great anguish."

21. Omega's Death:

The scene depicts the bay of the sea at the left and at the right, the land with a hut in the distance, with the forest and mountains rising behind. In the foreground kneels the man, seen half from the side, facing at the left. With his left hand on the sand, he supports himself, while with the other hand he strikes the head of the woman, whose body lies in the waves of the sea which appears to melt it, under the water.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which deals with Omega's return to the island and her death at the hands of Alpha: "One day the roebuck brought Omega back. Alpha is sitting on the beach and she comes towards him. Alpha felt his blood beating, his muscles swelled and he struck Omega so hard that she died."

22. Alpha's Death:

The scene depicts the man in the foreground lying in front of the beach, with one of his legs in the water. A group of animals attack him, throwing stones and biting him. They also appear to be yelling. The tiger is attacking the body and striking it with his paw, between the legs.

This scene illustrates the part of the poem which describes Alpha's death by Omega's offspring:  
"While he was still looking at her, he was attacked from behind by all his children and the animals of the island who tore him to pieces."



Fig. 1: Portrait of the  
Artist's Sister Inger, 1884.



Fig. 2: Evening, 1888.

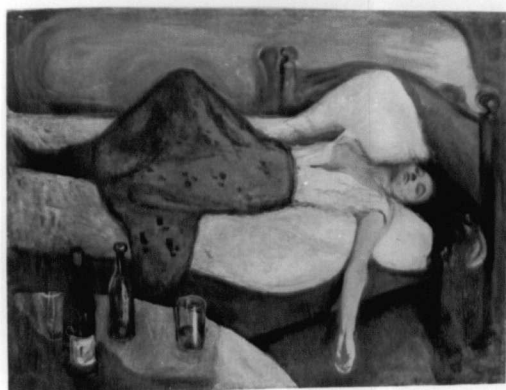


Fig. 3: The Day After, 1885.



Fig. 4: Tête-à-tête, 1885.

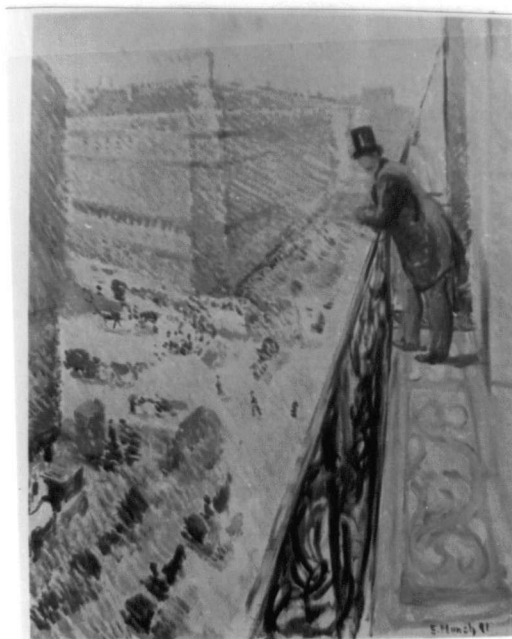


Fig. 5: Rue Lafayette, 1891.



Fig. 6: Spring Day on Karl Johan Street, 1891.

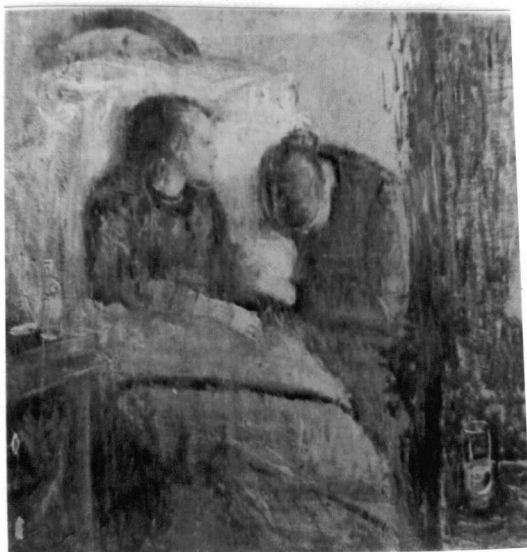


Fig. 7: Sick Child, (First version executed in 1886. This version was done in 1894.

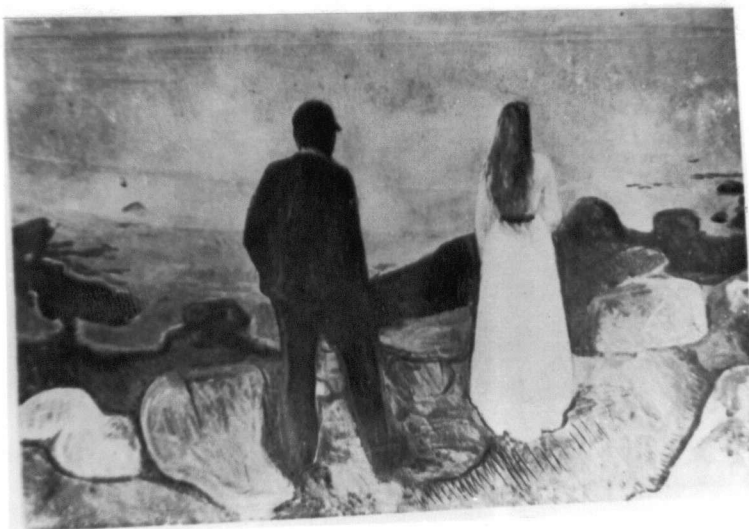


Fig. 8: Two Human Beings - The Lonely Ones, 1889.



Fig. 9: The Vision, 1893.



Fig. 10: The Alley, 1894.



Fig. 11: Symbolic Study, 1893.



Fig. 12: Three Aspects of Woman, 1895.



Fig. 13: The Voice. 1893.



Fig. 14: Attraction, 1896.

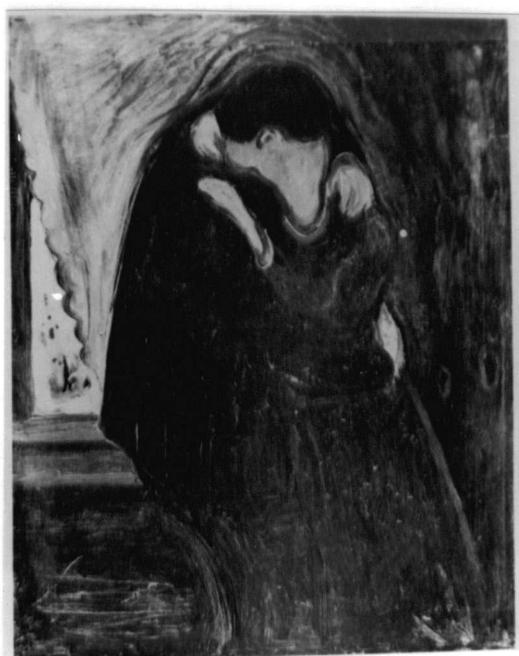


Fig. 15: The Kiss, 1892.

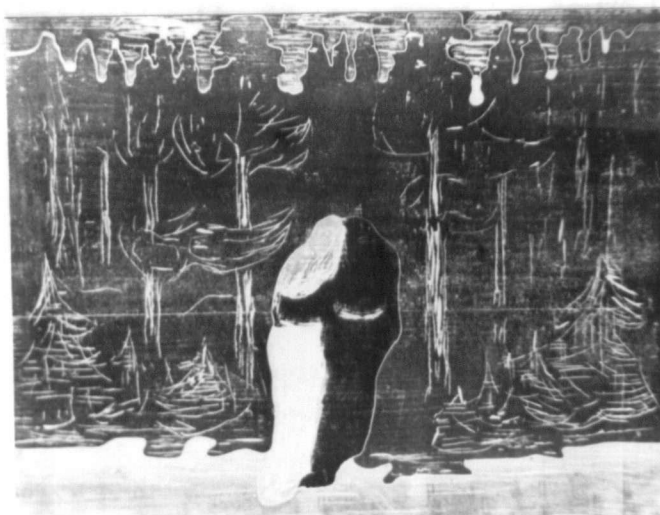


Fig. 16: To The Forest, 1897.



Fig. 17: Vampire, 1893.



Fig. 18: Ashes, 1894.

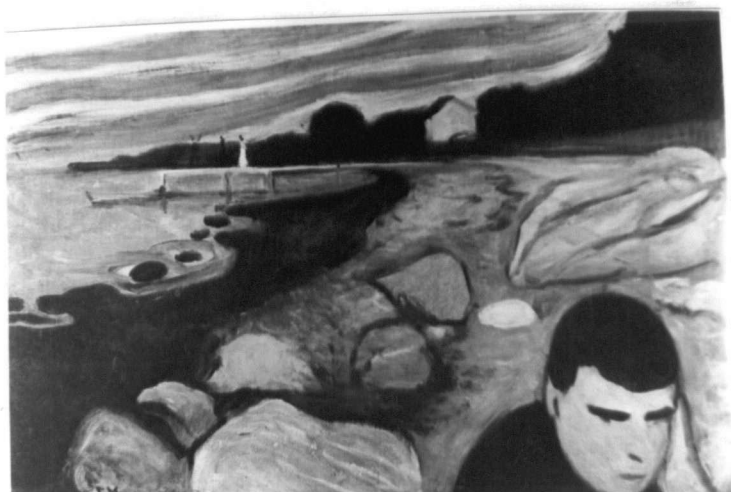


Fig. 19: Melancholy, 1891.



Fig. 20: Jealousy, 1895.



Fig. 21: Separation, 1896.

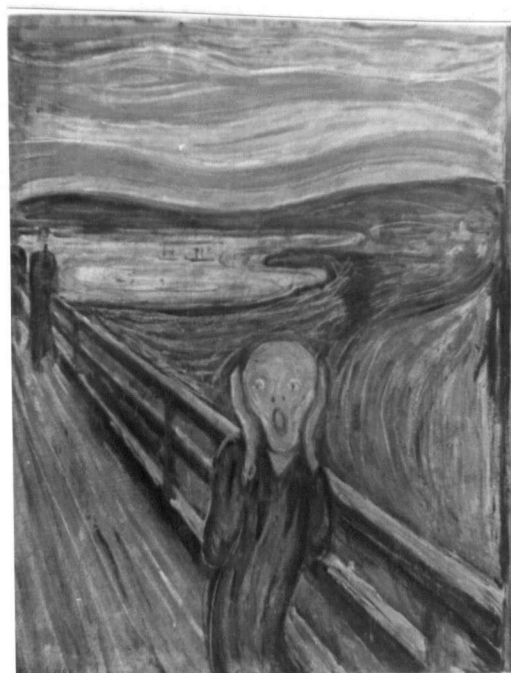


Fig. 22: The Scream, 1893

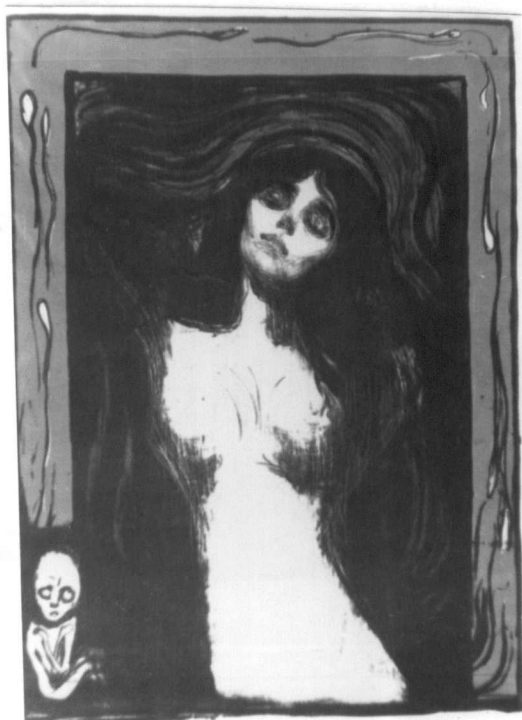


Fig. 23: Madonna, 1895.



Fig. 24: Life and Death, 1897.



Fig. 25: Four Sons of Max Linde, 1903.



Fig. 26: Harbour of Lubeck, 1907.



Fig. 27: Female Nudes with  
Red Carpet, 1903.



Fig. 28: At Doctor Jakobsen's Clinic, 1909.

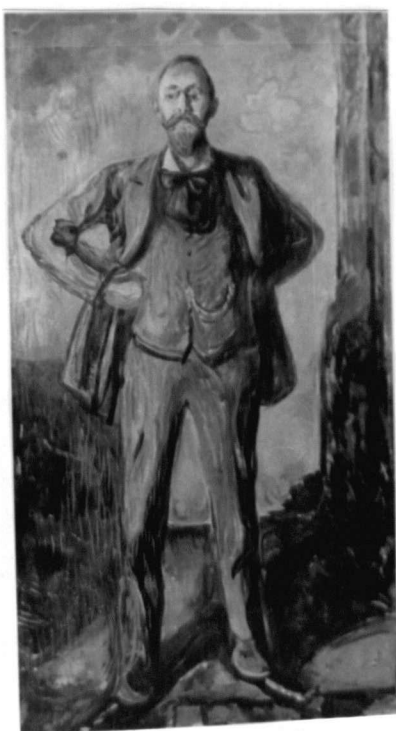


Fig. 29: Portrait of  
Dr. Jakobsen, 1909.



Fig. 30: The Nurse, 1909.

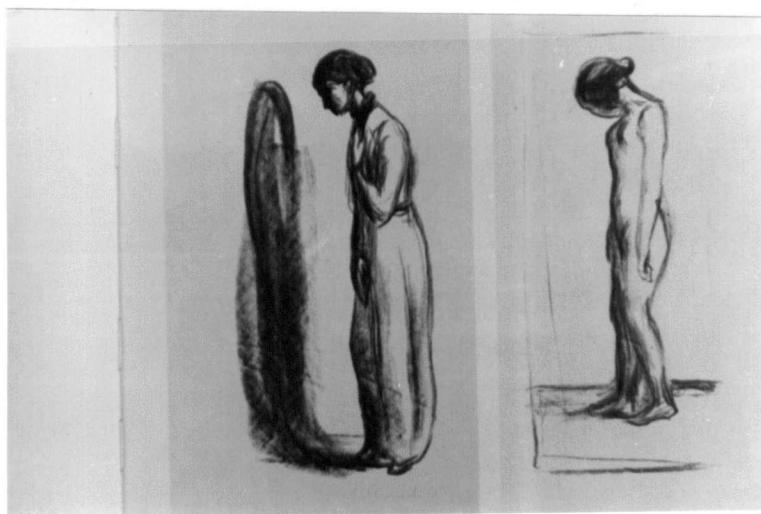


Fig. 31: Melancholia - The Insane Woman, 1909.



Fig. 32: The Death of Omega, 1896.

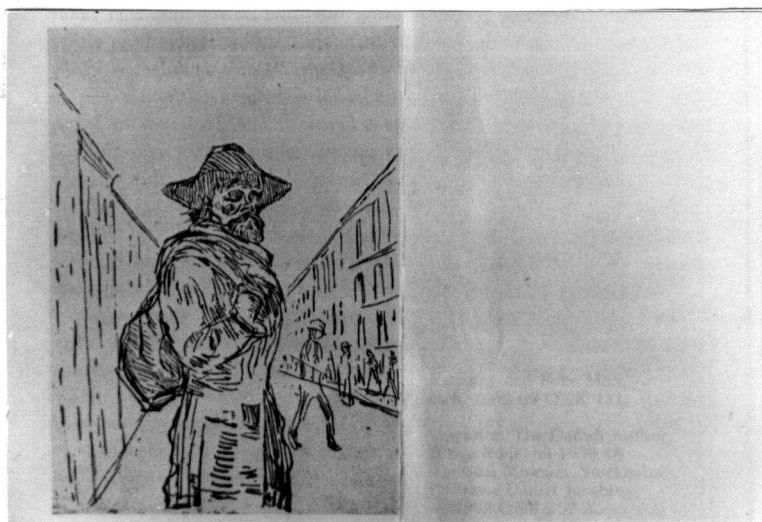


Fig. 33: The Rag and Bone Man or The Wanderer, 1909.

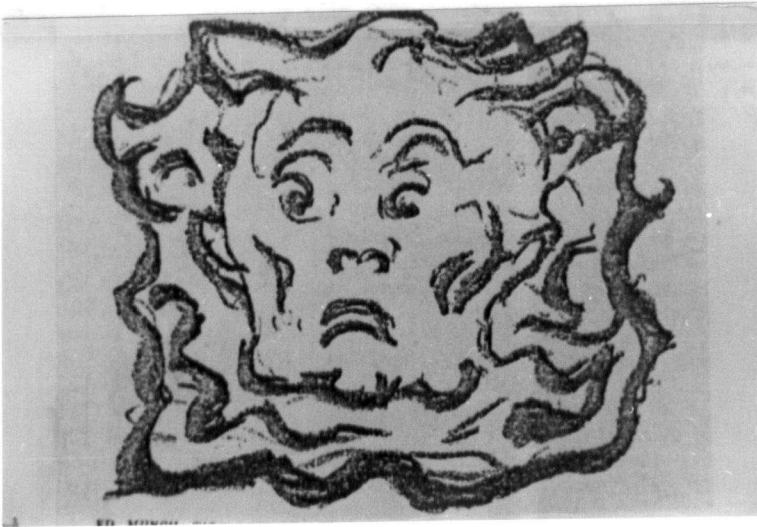


Fig. 34: The Title Vignette, 1909.



Fig. 35: The Poisonous  
Flower, 1909.

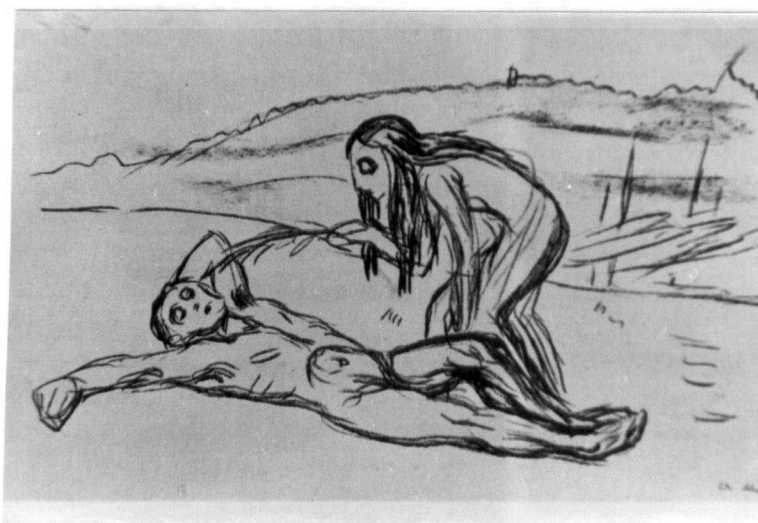


Fig. 36: Alpha and Omega, 1909.

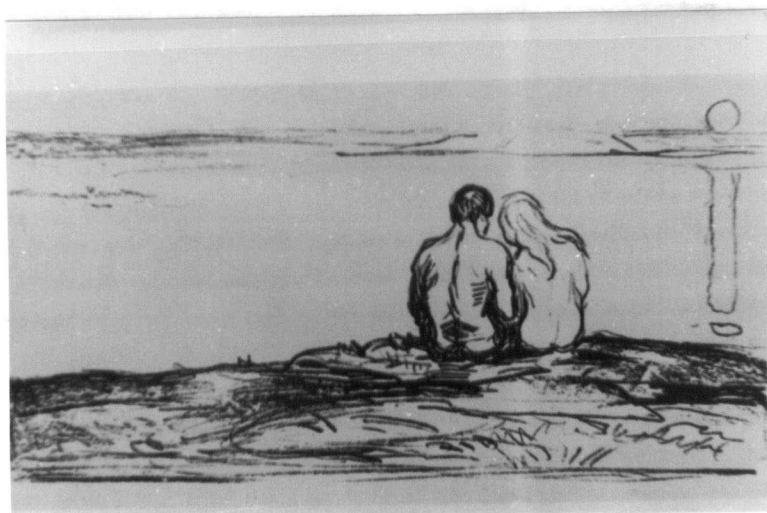


Fig. 37: The Rising Moon, 1909.

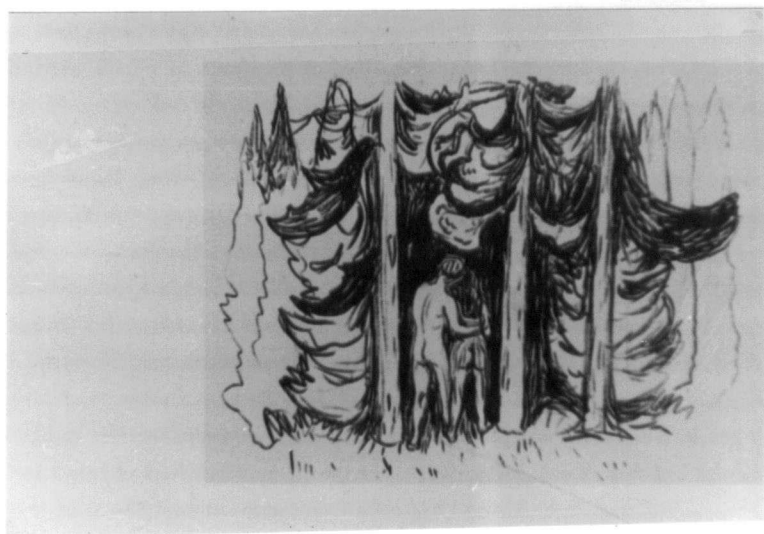


Fig. 38: To the Forest, 1909.

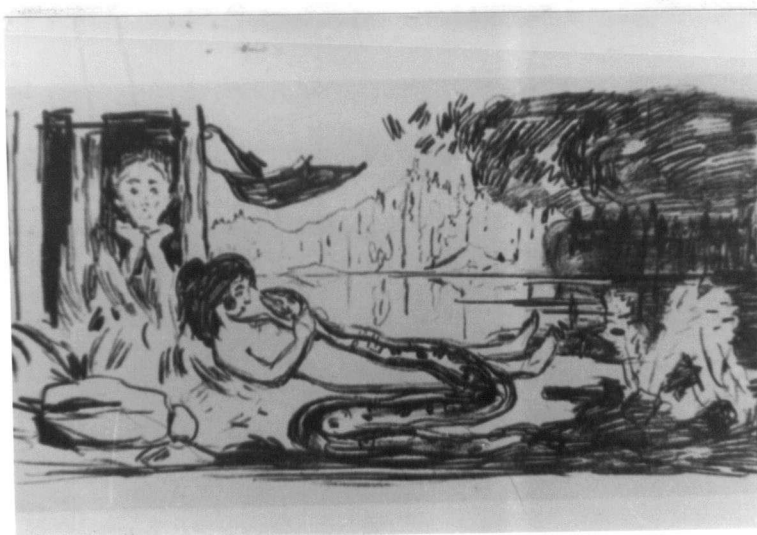


Fig. 39: Shadows, 1909

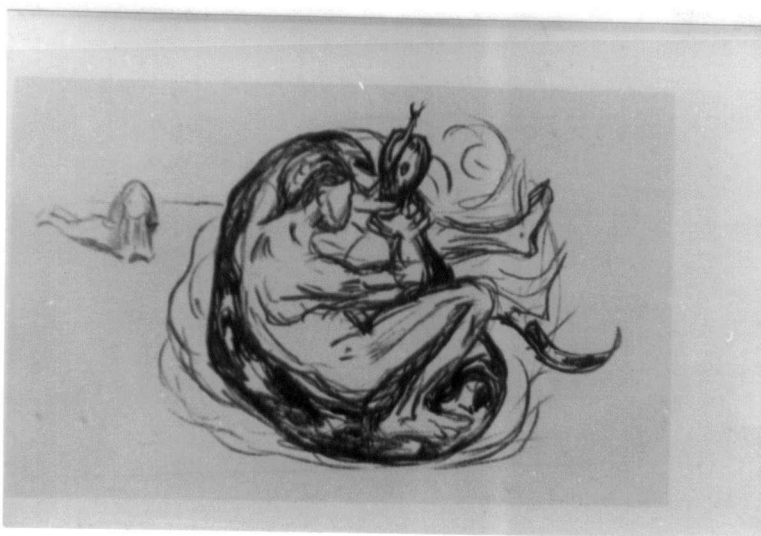


Fig. 40: The Snake is Strangled, 1909.

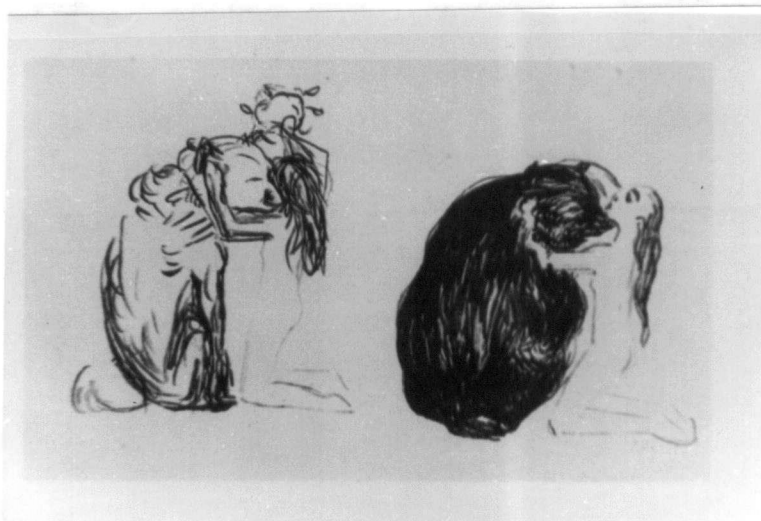


Fig. 41: The Bear, 1909.

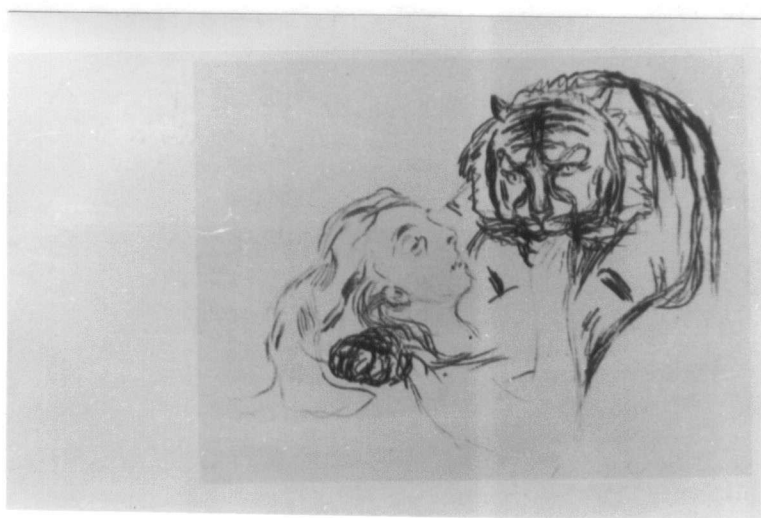


Fig. 42: The Tiger, 1909.

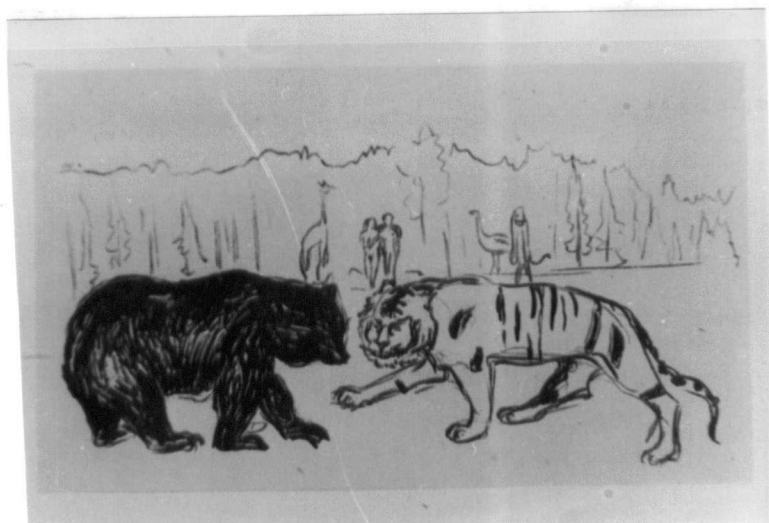


Fig. 43: The Tiger and the Bear, 1909.

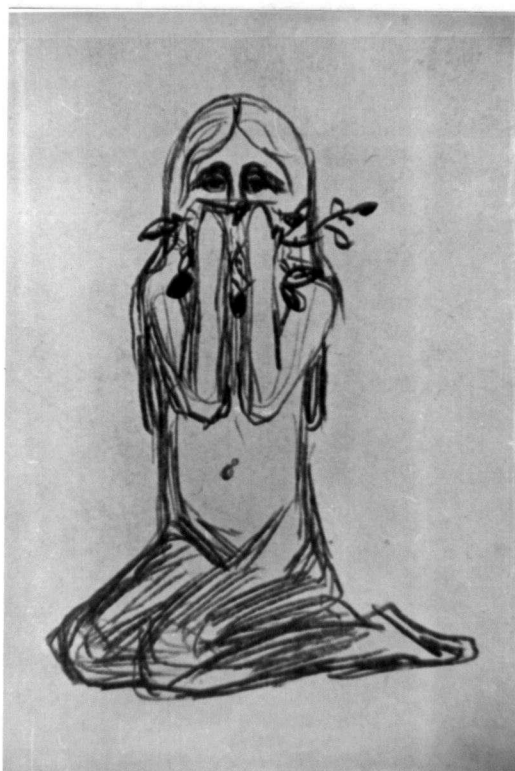


Fig. 44: Omega and the  
Flowers, 1909.



Fig. 45: Omega's Eyes, 1909.

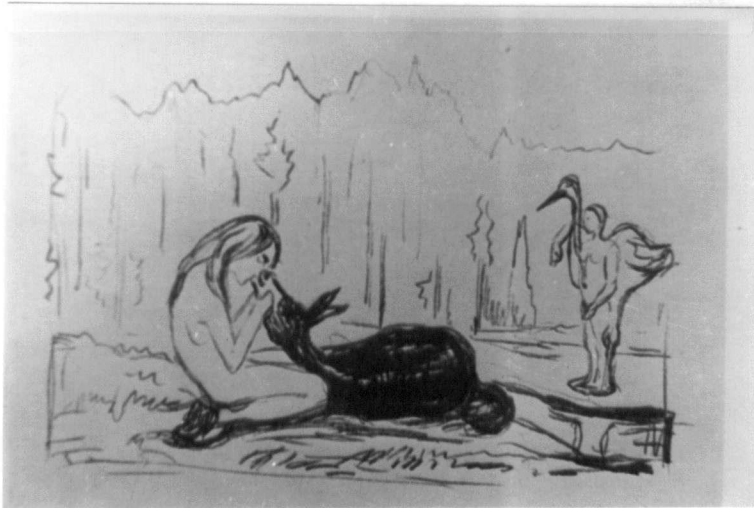


Fig. 46: Omega and the Donkey, 1909.



Fig. 47: Omega and the Pig, 1909.

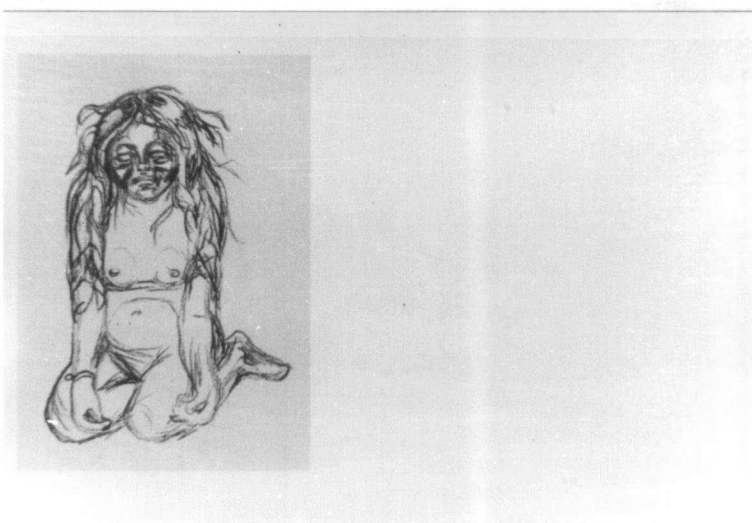


Fig. 48: Omega Weeps, 1909.

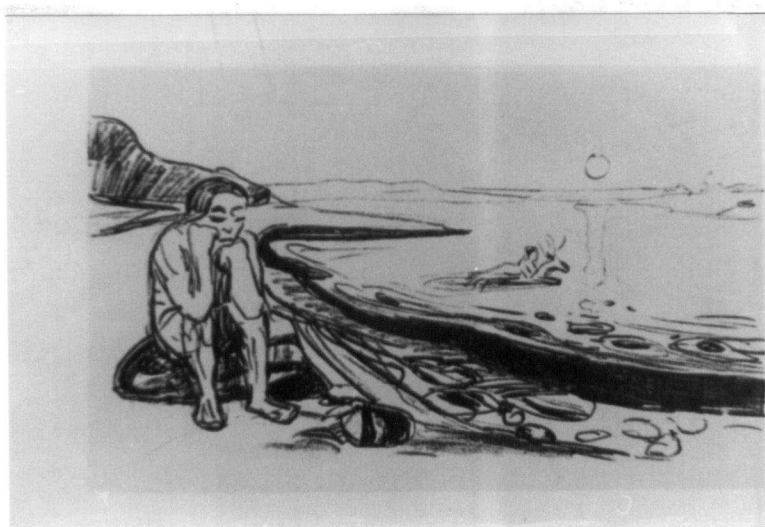


Fig. 49: Omega's Flight, 1909.



Fig. 50: Alpha's Progeny, 1909.

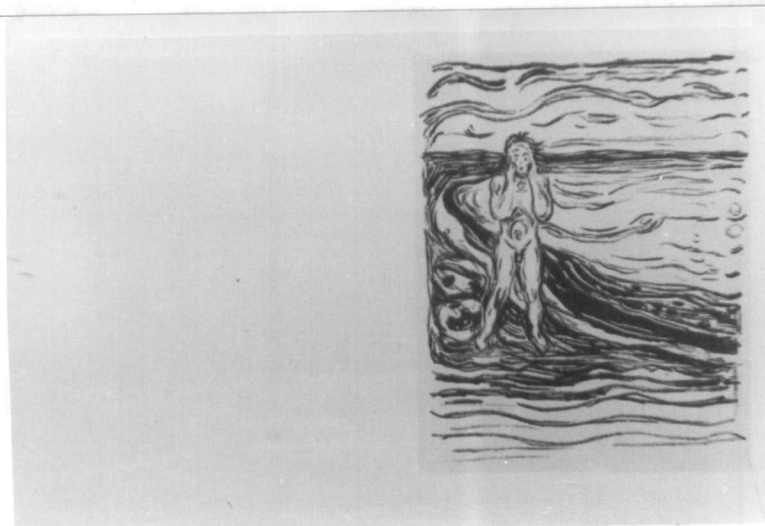


Fig. 51: Despair, 1909.

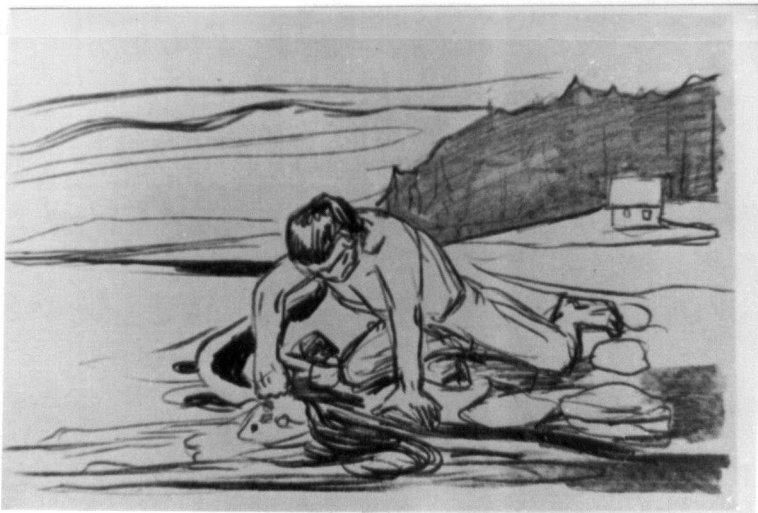


Fig. 52: Omega's Death, 1909.

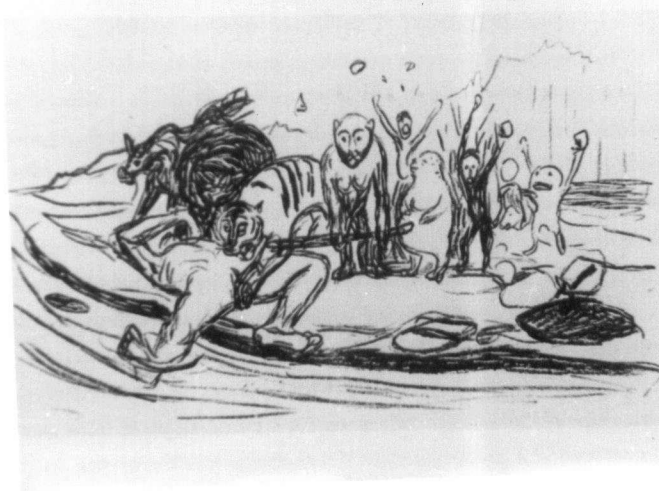


Fig. 53: Alpha's Death, 1909.