

I. The famous author John Updike once said, “Art is like baby shoes. When you coat them with gold, they can no longer be worn.” For many, art is beautiful, gilded, and pleasing to the eye. John Updike, though, reminds us that art need not be beautiful and golden to serve its purpose. Just as gold-coated baby shoes are no longer authentic, the most authentic art is real and true to itself. The story of Lina Vilkas in the novel *Between Shades of Gray* emphasizes this same idea: Art captures one individual’s reality and does not always look shiny, golden, and bright. In this story, the author Ruta Sepytys created Lina as a girl who loves and cherishes art. Lina adores Edvard Munch, a famous 19th-century painter, but also values her own identity as an artist. In *Between Shades of Gray*, Ruta Sepytys uses art and Edvard Munch as Lina’s muse in order to show how art can help people express authentic and real feelings.

II. Art functions as a source of relief for Lina. Early in the story, it is clear that art is important to Lina. For example, Lina remembers art at key moments in the text: [Example from story.] In this flashback, Lina recalls.... Later in the story, Lina speaks of the importance of art once again. She mentions that [example from story] Lina’s reliance on art becomes more significant as the story continues. In addition, the artist Edvard Munch appears early in the text and continues to emerge and reemerge in the story. Lina explains that Munch is her favorite artist and that he helps her to see the world in a way that makes sense. She explains that Munch’s art speaks to her: [Example from story] Munch has clearly influenced Lina and her memory of his art helps her see clearly when the meaning of life becomes difficult. Ruta Sepytys clearly selected Munch to emphasize the ways that art can help people think, reflect, and escape difficult moments.



III. Munch’s art has a strong influence on Lina in the story; she seeks refuge and knowledge as she recalls his paintings. Munch’s painting entitled “The Dead Mother” is an especially poignant work. This work of art depicts a young girl standing next to a woman in a bed. Munch captures the girl’s sense of shock with his signature stance; the girl holds her hands on her face in distress just as his painting “The Scream” shows a figure with hands in a similar location. The use of orange on the girl’s face and below her feet highlights her small figure; she stands in shock, but at the same time, she stands very alive while her mother, in neutral and pale blue colors, is lifeless behind her. Lina’s character also stands alongside an ill or dead family member in the story, and Munch’s painting honestly reveals the emotion of this reality. This painting captures Munch’s own personal grief, shock, and survival, as both his mother and sister died of tuberculosis. Just as Lina must survive in difficult conditions, Edvard Munch lived his own life surrounded by difficult moments to endure. Munch’s painting clearly captures the way that life sometimes leaves us alive and alone, facing the reality of life while people important to us have passed on. Ruta Sepytys likely selected Edvard Munch as Lina’s inspiration due to his style, dark subject matter, and desire to capture deep emotion.

IV. In *Between Shades of Gray*, Edvard Munch’s work influences and provides Lina with a reason to survive. His art, in all of its darkness and suffering, helps Lina to understand the world around her. As an artist, her own work shapes her experience and helps her to express herself when there is little else to think about and believe in. In the story, Edvard Munch helps Lina understand her own emotions. When Jonas falls ill, she feels desperate and helpless. The narrative reveals the ways that Munch helps her connect with her own feelings:

We steeped the leaves in the water I had boiled. Jonas drank it. Mother stayed propped at his side. I lay down but couldn’t sleep. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw the painting of The Scream in my head, but the face was my face. (199)

When Lina is in the midst of her darkest moments, she envisions Munch’s art. While his painting “The Scream” and his artwork as a whole cannot take away her pain, it provides her with a way to see her own reality. As she pictures her face in his painting, she can perhaps understand her own situation a bit more clearly and even realize that she is not the only one who has experienced a ‘scream-like’ moment.

V. For many, art provides a glimpse into another world. For others, it is a way to make sense of their own lives. For Lina, Edvard Munch’s art helps her to see and understand her own life more clearly. Art can have many

purposes in this world; for Lina, it helps her survive the dark moments in her life, and express her feelings, and, most importantly, feel human.