



On the Illness Narratives in *Wuthering Heights*

Jie Shan

School of Humanities, Tianjin Polytechnic University, Tianjin, China

Email: 3123726822@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Shan, J. (2026) On the Illness Narratives in *Wuthering Heights*. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e15649.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115649>

Received: June 17, 2026

Accepted: July 24, 2026

Published: July 27, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The illness narratives in *Wuthering Heights* are deeply rooted in Emily Brontë's life experiences and her insight into society. This paper analyzes it from three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social illnesses. Physiologically, through pathological descriptions such as Catherine's delirium and anorexia, and Linton family's tuberculosis, the paper demonstrates how illnesses drive characters' fates. Psychologically, it focuses on Catherine's desire for control, Heathcliff's paranoid revenge, and Lockwood's misanthropy, revealing the alienation of individual spirits. Socially, it dissects racism's exclusion of "the other" and patriarchy's monopoly on gender power, arguing that these social illnesses are the fundamental causes of the characters' tragedies. This paper offers a new perspective on "illness metaphors" for interpreting the novel, revealing the struggle of human nature and social maladies.

Subject Areas

Foreign Languages and Literatures

Keywords

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Illness Narratives

1. Introduction

Illness refers to a state of poor health. Robert A. Hahn, an American anthropologist, states in *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective* that illness is not defined by external symptoms or biological dysfunction alone but by the patient's subjective experience of an undesired physical or mental state. If an individual endures a bodily or emotional condition that he or she actively rejects—regardless of medical norms or biological "normality"—that state constitutes illness [1]. Furthermore, illness also symbolizes the decay of civilization. Early Western scholars have developed systematic theories concerning literary depictions of

illness. Susan Sontag notes in *Illness as Metaphor* that “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship” [2], implying that illness depictions in literature often exist as metaphors to reveal the development of individuals and society. Emily Brontë was a genius female writer in Victorian era. Her short life was constantly shadowed by disease, and her family was also threatened by tuberculosis. Besides, the harsh living environment and closed social structure of the Yorkshire moors deepened her understanding of illness and suffering, which significantly projected into the illness narratives of her novel *Wuthering Heights*. This paper analyzes the illness narratives in the novel from physical, psychological and social dimensions, so as to enrich the interpretation of the text.

2. Physical Illnesses

In *Wuthering Heights*, physical ailments are never mere bodily disorders. As tangible, embodied reflections of the characters’ inner torment and existential predicaments, they are deeply intertwined with their doomed fates. Emily Brontë weaves three predominant morbid states—delirium, anorexia, and tuberculosis—into the narrative fabric. These physical afflictions serve not as isolated medical symptoms, but as lyrical, symbolic portrayals of fractured psyches and crumbling lives, advancing the plot and foreshadowing inevitable tragedy through subtle bodily deterioration.

Catherine Earnshaw’s physical decline traces the exact trajectory of her tragic destiny, her body succumbing to the violent conflict between her divided affections and repressed desires. On the stormy night, Heathcliff flees *Wuthering Heights*, and Catherine, heartbroken, refuses to seek shelter and stands in the rain until she is drenched. The next day, she develops a fever and acts erratically: “It proved the commencement of delirium: Mr. Kenneth, as soon as he saw her, pronounced her dangerously ill; He bled her, and he told me to let her live on whey and water-gruel, and take care she did not throw herself downstairs or out of the window” [3]. Following this illness, the narrative presents Catherine’s rages as frequently inciting serious threats of fit. Especially after a fierce argument with Heathcliff and Edgar, her delirium worsens: “She increased her feverish bewilderment to madness, and tore the pillow with her teeth” [3]. Tormented by vivid hallucinations, she swears she sees Heathcliff’s ghost haunting the window, trapped in the memories of her childhood chamber at *Wuthering Heights* and the distant chime of Gimmerton’s bell. Later, her cognitive abilities seem to deteriorate, as she fails to recognize her own reflection in the mirror. Coherence of thought and language breaks down, manifesting in fragmented speech and pathological repetition—for instance, Catherine raves and constantly repeats words like “ghost” and “tombstone”. She also exhibits an inability to regulate her behavior, leading to extreme actions such as insisting on opening windows to let in the gale, and emotional outbursts that alternate between anger and eerie smiles. Accompanying her mental collapse is a severe loss of appetite, a physical withering stemming from both bodily fever and the crushing weight of emotional despair. Her wasting body

thus becomes a living metaphor for her fractured soul, unable to reconcile her two worlds.

Tuberculosis, the pervasive fatal malady of the nineteenth century, functions in the novel as a subtle, relentless force of fate, embodying slow, inevitable decay. Aggravated by cold, damp environments that pervade the moorland estates, this lingering illness preys on the frail Linton lineage, manifesting striking familial fatality. Though Isabella Linton's death is vaguely attributed to a lingering fever, her fragile constitution and gradual, wasting decline align perfectly with tubercular consumption.

In the novel, the Lintons' tuberculosis shows significant familial clustering. Isabella's early death is attributed to a "fever": "She and Edgar both lacked the rubby health that you will generally meet in these parts... they died of the same thing, a kind of fever, slow at its commencement, but incurable, and rapidly consuming life towards the close" [3]. Although the novel never explicitly names Isabella's illness, readers may combine this detail with Edgar's subsequent symptoms to infer that she, too, likely succumbed to tuberculosis. Edgar is frail from childhood. After an autumn harvest, he catches a bad cold from exposure to a cold, damp night, which develops into a lung infection: "my master caught a bad cold, that settled obstinately on his lungs and confined him indoors throughout the whole of the winter" [3]. As spring advances, Edgar can walk in the grounds with his daughter, but "his cheek was often flushed, and his eyes were bright". Such description might mislead inexperienced readers into thinking he has recovered, yet the narrative suggests the opposite. As Susan Sontag observes, "liveliness that comes from enervation, rosy cheeks that look like a sign of health but come from fever" [2]. The havoc that months had previously wrought is now emulated by the inroads of hours; he can bear to sit up in the library for only a brief period, and his chamber becomes his whole world—a clear indication that tuberculosis has severely impacted his life, and the novel strongly implies that he will die of it.

Little Linton, Heathcliff's son, showed more pronounced tuberculosis. As a baby, Isabella reported him in a letter as "an ailing, peevish creature". As a teenager, he constantly coughed, caught colds, and suffered pain, requiring windows to be closed early at night, and a breath of cold air caused him distress, and even in summer, he needed a fire. During young Catherine's contact with Linton, Readers can gain clearer insight into his disease. Once, he had a quarrel with young Catherine, and Cathy pushed his chair over, "he was immediately seized by a suffocating cough". Little Linton told Cathy, "I shall lie awake all night choking with this cough" [3], which further reveals his extreme physical weakness caused by lung disease, manifesting not only in heightened sensitivity to cold but also in severe disruption of sleep. Later, his cries were choked by coughing, "blood gushed from his mouth". His condition continued to deteriorate, and at the end of the novel, he even lacked the strength to lift his head: "his head fell drowsily on his breast, and he uttered nothing except suppressed moans of exhaustion or pain" [3]. Now, Linton has reached the advanced state of tuberculosis. However, Heathcliff refused

to invite a doctor, and without treatment, young Linton died quickly. Through these detailed depictions of tuberculosis, Emily Brontë, following 19th-century medical understandings, skillfully integrates pathological features into the narratives, making illness an internal driver of characters' fates and showcasing life's fragility and fate's capriciousness.

3. Psychological Illnesses

Catherine's intense desire for control is deeply rooted in her living environment and inner conflicts. After Mr. Earnshaw brought Heathcliff home, she established her dominant position by taking Heathcliff to roam the moors, and she often said "I took him" and "I taught him", bringing Heathcliff fully under her control. Catherine even boasted to Mr. Earnshaw: "how her pretended insolence, which he thought real, had more power over Heathcliff than his kindness: how the boy would do her bidding in anything, and his only when it suited his own inclination" [3], treating Heathcliff as an extension of her power. When Hindley took over and oppressed Heathcliff, relegating him to a servant, Catherine's control desire was further triggered. She tried to maintain her special relationship with Heathcliff, complaining to Nelly: "I'll make Hindley repent of treating him badly". This declaration was not merely a defense of Heathcliff, but more significantly, it reflected her resistance to the broken family power structure and her deliberate attempt to regain control over family relations. In matters of love and marriage, Catherine's desire for domination intensified further. When faced with Edgar's proposal, she became "torn between worlds": her soul belonged irrevocably to Heathcliff, yet she remained inexorably drawn to Edgar's wealth and social status, and eventually chose him. Paradoxically, she did not abandon Heathcliff, stating: "I am Heathcliff! He's always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being" [3], which indicates that Heathcliff was an inseparable part of her, an extension of her ego and the embodiment of her unspoken desires, rather than her equal lover. Thus, if Heathcliff's absolute obedience to Catherine can be seen as an extreme form of love, Catherine's feelings for Heathcliff are the pleasure of possession, enslavement, and domination. At the same time, she also showed strong control over Edgar, declaring: "Edgar must shake off his antipathy, and tolerate him, at least" [3]. She wants to control everyone around and make everyone follow her will.

Heathcliff's twisted psychology has long been a focus of academic attention, primarily manifesting as paranoia, obsessive fixation, and retaliatory revenge. This analysis labels Heathcliff's mindset "paranoia" based on dual theoretical grounds: textual evidence within the novel and Victorian Gothic literary criticism outlined by Helen Goodman [4]. Textually, Heathcliff consistently interprets all interpersonal slights, separations and social stratifications as deliberate targeted betrayal against himself; every act of prejudice or rejection he encounters is attributed to intentional malice, which forms the core textual basis for defining his paranoia. Critically, Victorian literary discourse tends to categorize long-term wounded at-

tachment and hypervigilant suspicion as paranoid traits, a framework this paper adopts to interpret his characterization. Meanwhile, clear conceptual distinctions are drawn between trauma, obsession, and modern psychiatric definitions of paranoid personality disorder to avoid conflating literary characterization with clinical diagnoses. Trauma refers to the cumulative racial and domestic mistreatment Heathcliff endured in childhood, serving as the original formative root of his mental distortion; obsession denotes his singular, all-consuming emotional fixation exclusively on Catherine, a persistent affective attachment bred from trauma; revenge is the outward behavioral expression triggered by obsessive paranoia. These three interrelated literary constructs differ fundamentally from standardized modern psychiatric diagnostic labels, which rely on systematic clinical symptom criteria and medical observation, a boundary maintained throughout this interpretation.

From his growth experience, adopted by Mr. Earnshaw into *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff suffered endless discrimination and abuse from Hindley, especially after Mr. Earnshaw's death. Hindley treated Heathcliff as a servant, deprived him of education, often beat him, and forbade his contact with Catherine. Long-term unfair treatment sowed the seeds of hatred in Heathcliff's heart. Psychological studies prove that childhood trauma exerts a profound impact on personality development. Heathcliff, in such an environment, was filled with a sense of deprivation and insecurity. He truly loved Catherine, who is the most important emotional anchor for him, but she chose to marry Edgar Linton for social status and material comfort. "Marrying Heathcliff would degrade me", which was a heavy betrayal for Heathcliff that shattered his romantic love. Frustration in love further aggravated his paranoia and he left the manor with hatred. Three years later, Heathcliff made a dramatic reappearance before them all—now wealthy, accomplished, and exuding an air of refined elegance, bearing no resemblance to the wretched wild child he once was. Yet none could perceive that beneath this veneer of gentlemanly civility lurked a ruthless "Count of Monte Cristo" stripped of humanity. With his return, Heathcliff unleashed his consuming vengeance. He exploited Hindley's degradation to win *Wuthering Heights*' property, making Hindley his servant; He married Edgar's sister Isabella but abused her to revenge Edgar; after Edgar, Catherine, Isabella, and Hindley died, he turned to avenging their children, depriving Hareton of education to make him a vulgar illiterate, and forcing Catherine's daughter to marry his sickly son Linton to seize Thrushcross Grange. For him, Linton was merely a tool of revenge, with no paternal love. Besides, his paranoid love for Catherine never diminished. He had dug up her grave many times at night to sleep beside her. In general, each of his revenge plans was cold-blooded and meticulously calculated. He would not miss any chance to harm enemies. This obsessive revenge has gone beyond the normal range of emotional responses and is an external manifestation of the distorted psychology.

Mr. Lockwood, one of the narrators, shows psychological traits of misanthropy. Upon arriving at Thrushcross Grange, Lockwood declared: "This is certainly a

beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven". As a gentleman, he could have taken part in lively social activities, but he chose to live in seclusion in this remote village, even regarding the reclusive Heathcliff as "a suitable pair to divide the desolation". This choice reflects his weariness of social interaction, essentially stemming from disappointment in real-life interpersonal relationships. In intimate relationships, he exhibits self-destructive avoidance. When he encountered the "charming goddess" by the sea, he "never told of love", but when she returned his gaze with "sweet looks", he "shrunk icily like a snail", eventually causing her to leave in confusion. This experience lays bare his fear of intimate relationships—longing to be loved while self-enclosing out of fear of harm. Thus, he constructs a protective shell with "indifference", yet bears the misunderstanding of being "cold-hearted". He came to the manor to escape people, but instead he heard a vast and complex story involving two families, trapping him in more complicated human relations. At the end of the story, Lockwood developed a feeling of love for young Catherine: "What a realisation of something more romantic than a fairy tale it would have been for Mrs. Linton Heathcliff, had she and I struck up an attachment, as her good nurse desired, and migrated together into the stirring atmosphere of the town!" (p. 302). Love involves not only the two individuals but also the interactions between families. It means that one has to establish a connection with a stranger and his or her family. In other words, marital relationship is a form of social relations. Through his conversations with Nelly, Lockwood developed a yearning for love, which indicates his willingness to build connections with society. Therefore, to some extent, his psychological illness was cured.

4. Social Illnesses

Michel Foucault proposed in *Discipline and Punish* the close connection between medical and social spaces: "an administrative and political space is constituted by means of a medical space" [5]. The writing of hospital wards and society shares logical commonalities, as it is the pathological society that brews the physical and mental ill-health of individuals. During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom witnessed rapid development, which propelled colonial expansion. To maintain colonial rule, colonizers propagated the "white superiority theory" and regarded the people in colonized regions as an "inferior race", thus giving rise to racism. Meanwhile, with the development of capitalism, men dominated the production sphere, confining women to the domestic realm. As a result, the social norm of "men work outside while women manage the household" emerged, strengthening the patriarchal order. In this novel, these two social diseases, racism and patriarchy, are fully manifested, which also serve as the root causes of the tragic fates of the characters in the novel.

Scholarly debates over Heathcliff's identity have long centered on whether he functions as a racialized colonial Other, a reading anchored by Maja-Lisa von

Sneidern's canonical 1995 essay *Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool Slave Trade* [6]. Von Sneidern situates the novel's timeline against the 1771 Somerset Case and Liverpool's status as Britain's dominant slave-trading hub, arguing Emily Brontë deliberately embeds the discourse of racial subjugation into Heathcliff's characterization: the orphan picked from Liverpool's slave-trading streets stands as a literary allegory for discarded colonial human cargo subjected to Anglo-Saxon racial hierarchy [6]. Racism essentially originates from the collective exclusion of the racialized "Other" within white landed society. As a dark-skinned figure repeatedly labeled a "Gypsy", Heathcliff is marked as inherently inferior the moment he enters *Wuthering Heights*, framed as "a stain of civilization" by the novel's white characters. When Mr. Earnshaw first brings him home, Catherine spits at the ragged orphan; housekeeper Nelly abandons him on the manor platform, secretly hoping he would vanish overnight; Hindley persistently dehumanizes him with the derogatory epithet "Gypsy". After Heathcliff and Catherine sneak into Thrushcross Grange, the Linton family sneers that the dark boy ought to be hanged for the perceived barbarism etched on his face, revealing the unbridled racial prejudice held by landed gentry. Following old Earnshaw's death, Hindley fully unleashes racist oppression: he strips Heathcliff of formal education, reduces him to unpaid menial labor, and subjects him to constant physical and verbal abuse. Young Heathcliff gradually internalizes the white community's judgment, painfully admitting his desire to possess fair skin and genteel appearances: "I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be" [3]. This rigid stratification built on skin color and foreign lineage mirrors the nationwide doctrine of racial hierarchy that sustained Britain's transatlantic colonial empire. Chronic racial persecution fosters profound alienation and resentment within Heathcliff, epitomized by his famous observation: "The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them" [3]. Transformed from a quiet, resilient child into a vengeful demon armed with wealth and violent power, Heathcliff replicates the oppressor's logic of domination against the white upper class. His self-destructive final years—marked by starvation and persistent auditory hallucinations—expose the corrosive social toxicity of institutional racism: once human worth is judged solely by racial lineage, hatred mutates into a distorted tool of retaliation, and the entire social order sinks into irreversible moral decay through the perpetual exclusion of the colonial other.

The symptom of patriarchy manifests as absolute control over gender and power, with its violence penetrating every corner of family and society. As the head of *Wuthering Heights*, Mr. Earnshaw possessed absolute decision-making power over family affairs. He brought Heathcliff back from Liverpool and gave him equal affection as his biological children. The decision was made entirely by himself, even though Mrs. Earnshaw opposed it but failed to change it. After his death, Hendorby inherited the property and took control of the family. He degraded Heathcliff to a servant, arbitrarily deprived him of the right to education, and

forced him to engage in heavy manual labor. Hendry's authority is unquestionable and his actions are not subject to any constraints. This arbitrary manipulation of the fates of family members clearly demonstrates the absolute dominance of male power in the family. In terms of Marriage, Catherine's tragedy is a typical sample of patriarchal discipline. Under Victoria's mainstream discourse of "family angles", she was required to enter a patriarchal marriage system with elegance and obedience. Catherine was independent and unrestrained in personality, she still couldn't escape the constraints of the patriarchal society when it came to choosing a marriage partner. Her soul deeply loved Heathcliff, but due to conventional ideas and considerations of wealth and status, she ultimately chose to marry Edgar Linton. Edgar regarded Catherine as his subordinate and tried to restrain her nature by etiquette of the estate. After marriage, Catherine's life was subject to many restrictions. Her behavior, speech, and social interactions had to conform to the standards of the patriarchal society represented by Edgar. This reflects the miserable plight of women, who were treated as men's possessions under the patriarchal system. This oppression is more naked in the second generation: Isabella is used by Heathcliff as a revenge tool, and young Cathy is forced to marry young Heathcliff, becoming a pawn in men's struggle for property and power. Emily Brontë proves through two generations of women that whether in the savage moors or civilized manors, the patriarchal system always objectifies women as exchangeable assets, depriving them of free will and emotional choices. It is precisely the social illness of patriarchy that reduces women to appendages and turns society into an arena of power struggle.

5. Conclusion

The illness narratives in *Wuthering Heights* are far more than mere pathological writings but a profound critique of human nature, civilization, and society. Physical illnesses outline life's fragility and impermanence, psychological illnesses expose individual mental distortion under oppression, while social illnesses like racism and patriarchy point to the structural cancers of 19th-century British society—the former creating survival dilemmas for the "other" through blood division, the latter alienating women into accessories through gender power, jointly weaving a net that devours humanity. Through illness metaphors, Emily Brontë reveals the moral decay beneath civilization: when society oppresses by identity and gender, individual illnesses become mirrors of social illnesses. Only by breaking the power chains of race and gender can the persecution of humanity and society by illnesses end. Thus, Emily's sharp insight into social illnesses holds profound practical significance today. This essay delivers solely a metaphorical and cultural interpretation of the novel's diseased figures rather than a historical-medical reconstruction of Victorian medical records and clinical realities.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Hahn, R.A. (1995) *Sickness and Healing: An Anthropological Perspective*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1dszzh5>
- [2] Sontag, S. (1978) *Illness as Metaphor*. Vol. 3. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [3] Brontë, E. (2015) *Wuthering Heights*. World Book Inc.
- [4] Goodman, H. (2015) *Mad Men: Masculinity and Insanity in Victorian Literature*. Royal Holloway, University of London, 4.
- [5] Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books, 5.
- [6] von Sneidern, M.-L. (1995) *Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool Slave Trade*. *ELH*, **62**, 171-196.