

The Portrayal of the Ill and the Illness

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“What is not fatal is not cancer” Dr. George Groddeck, considered as a founder of psychosomatic medicine, proclaimed in “The book of It” [1]. The myriad of ways in which diseases and those affected are depicted in literature are countless. But how they have shaped us, and more importantly what do they mean once we ourselves get ill. Does our language, the terms we use to describe illnesses have powers beyond our understanding. Do they come to play when we get ill, when we are presented with a chronic disease? Do we suddenly conform to the language used, and perhaps fall victim to word play.

In Susan Sontag’s widely acclaimed book “Illness as a metaphor” she depicts her own journey while struggling with a cancer diagnosis. She sourly concludes that metaphors hold no place in the journey towards recovery. “I want to describe, not what it is really like to emigrate to the kingdom of the ill and live there, but the punitive or sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation: not real geography, but stereotypes of national character.” Susan writes [2].

On the other hand one can argue that the power of science is greater, that it has the function and capacity to discard any metaphors or myths of disease created throughout history. Another standpoint is that we simply cannot shake diseases off of their symbolic values and literary depictions. But the most important question has fervently survived the test of time since the publication of Sontag’s trailblazing piece back in 1978.

That is; does our culture and written word shape the individual experience of illness?

Moreover how well do our scientific findings translate in comparison to the more easily accessible world of literature. And how aware are we as physicians of the contemporary views on illness and the ill in our modern day culture. Surely this awareness has a pivotal role in the mode of which we communicate with our patients. All these questions are worthy of our attention on the journey towards becoming great physicians.

Studying how cancer has been depicted throughout history in literature is a journey filled with fearful and dark adjectives, metaphors and symbols. It is almost unanimously described as a death sentence. And the stigma surrounding neoplasms is a burden that unfortunately is carried by those who have it.

Nazis at one point in time described Jews as a cancerous lesion that was tarnishing the “pure” body of the German people. Sontag states “conventions of treating cancer as no mere disease but a demonic enemy make it not just a lethal disease but a shameful one [2,3]”.

This account is especially problematic while patients that might react to certain symptoms out of fear and shame [3] neglect to contact the health care system. Thus the stigma around cancer created by cultural depictions finally becomes an obstacle, and may very well worsen a diagnosis while staggering patients from reaching out.

However Sontag also concluded that once the causes of diseases are unveiled the metaphors would succumb to fill any role or function and thus be abandoned over scientific facts. But this might take a very long time, as plausible disease causes often if not always require great periods of research. But one cannot escape that viewing a disease as a biological phenomenon rather than a social or moral one is

a vital if not critical realization on the road towards recovery while suffering from a disease. Imagining society taking on the same standpoint is mind-boggling. Until then it lies upon us as caregivers and physicians to strip metaphors of their powers by exposing, criticizing and increasing awareness around their invisible yet significant role [4].

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