

# Pain as Literary Art: A Reading of Illness Memoirs to Understand the Use of the Figurative Language to Define Illness, Life and Mortality

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## Abstract:

The first-person illness narratives offer a new language and the representative terms, in which the pain of unspeakable can be articulated. Illness narratives allow space for the figurative use of language to express the unspeakable thoughts, so that others can recognize and empathize with the narrators. The narrators of the illness memoirs need a second language so that they can express their suppressed thoughts. Tropes in Illness narratives can be considered, as Sarah Pet says 'Devil's dictionary' or 'the Language of Pain' as termed by David Biro. The researcher in this paper studies the illness memoirs *The Undying* by Anne Boyer and *Dying- A Memoir* by Cory Taylor, and makes a note on the figurative use of language designed by the narrators to articulate unexpressed pain, and to understand the codes used by the narrators to heighten the sensibilities. Pain is an all-encompassing entity, and that's why, it has rightly been said, that pain is the black hole into which language seems to disappear. Metaphors and their place in the decoration of illnesses have been acclaimed for a long. Virginia Woolf captures her 'romanticized' views on illness in her essay *On Being Ill*. But, Susan Sontag in her classic *Illness as Metaphor* disapproves of the metaphorical use of language to describe illnesses, because, according to her, it may distort the realistic approaches to illnesses. But, the figurative language has always been helpful to ease out the representation of illness. According to David Biro, language itself is inherently metaphorical and there is no other way, but to make use of metaphors if we wish to express the unexpressed thoughts. Thus, at the heart of this research, the researcher explores the figurative use of language developed by the narrators to define illness, life, and death

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Humans have always used narratives to share subtle nuances. To tell a story is a human tendency and the development of a language is an evolutionary process of making elaborate use of metaphors and other figures of speech in the narratives. Individuals have always made use of narratives to re-examine and re-fashion their sense of identity in their hard times. Gellner in his book *Reason and Culture* (1992) mentions that in fact in such a context, narratives constitute an 'infinite reservoir of meanings and comprehension.' (Gellner 1992) In recent times, illness narratives have received significant attention in the field of social sciences, medical sciences, and literary criticism. It is the most prominent reality we tend

to avoid, but illness indeed shapes our perception of the world, and the ill body governs the way we think and write about ourselves.

Illness Memoirs as a literary genre got prominence in the late twentieth century. According to Anne Hawkins Illness, a memoir was relatively a new burgeoning genre which was not heard of before 1990. (Hawkins 1944) In the last three decades, the literary circle experienced an abundance of life writings on the experience of illness, narrating the story of being diagnosed with a terminal illness. A memoir is a literary form in which the authors relate and reflect on experiences from their own life. Writers choose these genres as a way to find or reclaim their voices and share traumatic incidents from memories. As illness memoirs have now become an established genre in literary studies, it demands more inquiry and critical appreciation of the form. The first-person illness narratives offer language and representative terms in which the pain of the unspeakable can be articulated. Illness narratives allow space for the figurative use of language to express unspeakable thoughts so that others can recognize and empathize with the narrators. The narrators of the illness memoirs need a second language so that they can express their suppressed thoughts. This paper analyses the figurative use of language by the narrators to articulate unexpressed pain and to understand the codes used by the narrators to heighten the sensibilities. Pain is an all-encompassing entity, and that's why, it has rightly been said, that pain is the black hole into which language seems to disappear. Hence, David Biro in his book *The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief* mention pain as "an all-consuming internal experience that threatens to destroy everything except itself..." (Biro 2010)

This research paper proposes to study figurative language and codes coined by the narrators in the illness memoirs, *Dying: A Memoir* (2016) by Cory Taylor and *The Undying* (2019) - by Anne Boyer. Thus, the objectives of the research paper are

- 1. To study the terms and expressions coined by the authors to define the process of 'living and dying' in the face of a terminal illness.**
- 2. To trace the different stages the narrators go through in the process of healing.**

A chronic or terminal illness is a lived experience of the individual and the family, and it allows them to perceive and experience the illness and the system of care. According to Thomas G. Couser, as it is mentioned in his book *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*, "prolonged, serious, or chronic illnesses may ultimately yield more complex narratives than acute illness." (Couser 1997) Chronic illnesses can lead patients to rethink and reconstruct the self. The tormented self in its incoherency seeks to tell a story experienced and timed around the terminal illness. There are several questions, the researcher tries to answer in this chapter; what does it take to weave the story of illness? What techniques can capture the experiences?

In *Dying: A Memoir* (2016), published months before her death because of cancer in 2016. Taylor does not describe her illness but opens the argument that a terminally ill person should have a right to assisted death. She describes how she had purchased a euthanasia drug online from China saying it was for a sick animal. She sets the tone for how she thinks about her death in these opening pages, she describes she was as 'unprepared as anyone could be. It was as if I had stumbled out of a land of make-believe into the realm

of the real.’ (Taylor 106) Taylor manages to gather her incoherent self in the narrative to express her authority over her body, although it was a textual authority.

*...It helps me to feel that my autonomy is still intact, that I might yet be able to influence my fate... I have heard it said that modern dying means dying more, dying over longer periods, ensuring more uncertainty, and subjecting ourselves and our families to more disappointments and despair.<sup>1</sup> (Taylor 146)*

Death has always been noted as a taboo topic in our discussions. Societies find this theme unwelcoming, and inauspicious to represent its manifestations. But the theme of living and dying has found its prominent place in the contemporary literary and visual arts. Literary and visual cultures not only have presented death as a recurring theme but also use the narratives of death in the backdrop of terminal illness to seek recovery and healing from immanence and chaos. The narrators of the illness memoirs are going through terminal illnesses, and the narrators make sense of their living in the face of their inevitable death. The paper finds this theme important and tries to understand the narrators’ sense of living and dying in the face of illnesses.

When Addison, who was Taylor’s biographer, unexpectedly dies of a cardiac arrest. Taylor was moved to write about the shock and unfairness of this sudden death, and how it led her to realise that her own 'slow' death had *allowed her to say a long goodbye .... You have a lot of time to talk, to tell people how you feel, to try and make sense of the whole thing ... both for yourself and for those who remain. (Taylor 108)*

Kubler in her work talks about Pathographies and a process of passive acceptance as bearing the burden of proposed by the necessities of illness and death. The logic of narrative is to displace the problem of past and future in addition to the problem of acceptance and response toward the present. (Kubler 206) Anne Hunsaker Hawkins observes that illness writing is a functional, positive attempt to rebuild one's self after a traumatic occurrence.’ (Hunsaker 101) It becomes an attempt to give meaning to fiction, to express pain from the clutches of more pain in the future. Hence, Ane Boyer when experiencing her life in the wake of a deadly illness, maintains an active acceptance of the fact of her living with a transformative regeneration of her identity with a new wakeful life.

*Are you going to be the snake or are you going to be the snake's cast-off skin? (Boyer 65)*

Metaphors and their place in the decoration of illness have been acclaimed for a long. Virginia Woolf captures her ‘romanticized’ views on illness in her essay *On Being Ill.* (Woolf) But, Susan Sontag in her classic, *Illness as Metaphor* disapproves of the metaphorical use of language to describe illnesses, because, according to her, it may distort the realistic approaches to illnesses. Both of them see illness as a change in citizenship. (Sontag 99) But for Woolf, the experience of illness is contemplated by metaphorical discourse and finds that there is no illness apart from language, and it is an experience that exposes the limitations of existing discourse and invites new figurations: in other words, to make and to see it now. Here, Woolf in a way announces the modern writers to “make it new”. She calls for “a new language ..., more primitive, more sensual, and more obscene” as well as “a new hierarchy of the passions...” (Woolf 7-8). Figurative language has always been helpful to ease the representation of illness. According to David

Biro, language itself is inherently metaphorical and there is no other way, but to make use of metaphors if we wish to express unexpressed thoughts. (Biro 73)

As Anne Boyer applies the metaphor of democracy to talk about her illness as the making of a new world of your own although it stands as a cruel democracy. *“The cancer pavilion is a cruel democracy of appearance: the same bald head, the same devastated complexion, the same steroid-swollen face, the same plastic chemotherapy port visible as a lump under your skin. The old seem infantile, the young act senile, the middle-aged find all that is middle-aged about them disappear.”* (Boyer 25) There is this monstrous silence Cory Taylor wishes to talk about in her memoir and this was an attempt to engage herself and the audience on the topic of death. she notes, *‘When you’re dying, even your unhappiest memories can induce a kind of fondness, as if delight is not confined to the good times, but is woven through your days like a skein of gold thread’*. (Taylor 125) Anne Hunsaker Hawkins calls narratives of illness and death in his book *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* is to engage with sickness and death to teach about life and writing. An ill body finds an opportunity to narrate an incident, and in the process, he/she revisits the lived life in a narrative form to make use of the time that remains. Dying is rather observed as a transformative force to transform oneself from the immanence of pain. Cory Taylor writes, *“When I was first diagnosed, I was angry with myself for being too lazy and stupid to bother with anything but the occasional quick examination. But then I decided that kind of thinking was a waste of my time because we start dying the moment we are born.”* (Taylor 88) Corry accepts her illness and makes it a point to realize the present moment and plan her life timed around her disease.

### Conclusion:

The narrators in illness narratives offer a second language in which they heighten the sense of control over their selves. As it is mentioned, language seems to disappear in the reconstruction of illness and hence, the use of metaphors and figurative language get a space to articulate expressions in different forms. Illness narratives sharing the experience of living and dying set transformative forces of recovery. But recovery in this case is not a physical recovery but a healing of the self. With the help of the narratives, the narrators find the strength to unknot traumatic incidence to seek coherency to construct a new identity which is timed around a disease.

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