# A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ILLNESS IN EMILY BRONTË'S "WUTHERING HEIGHTS"

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**Abstract**: *Our paper will approach the concept of illness from a cultural-semiotic point of view. Our aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the images of illness in Wuthering Heights, which may also constitute a model for looking at depictions of illness in other Victorian novels as well. We have attempted to show how modalization in speech becomes a symptom (from a semiotic perspective) of illness. In other words, illness manifests itself in the sick character's language, making it appear hallucinatory and hesitating. We have also tried to look at images of ghosts and vampires in the novel as icons of illness.*

**Keywords:** *concept, illness, culture, semiotics, image, speech, language.*

## 1. Introduction

In the Victorian period, illness was mainly associated with terms such as: hysteria (brain fever), hallucination, delirium, despondency, intemperance, consumption, anorexia, monomania, self-alienation and expressed in fiction through such metaphors as: vampires and ghosts, alcoholism, cholera, rabies, blindness, hypochondria. Most of all these disorders were viewed as somatoform disorders. Somatoform disorders are a group of mental disturbances placed in a common category on the basis of their external symptoms. These disorders are characterized by physical complaints that appear to be medical in origin but that can not be explained in terms of a physical disease, the results of substance abuse, or by an other mental disorder. In order to meet the criteria for a somatoform disorder, the physical symptoms must be serious enough to interfere with the patient's employment or relationships, and must be symptoms that are not under the patient's voluntarycontrol.

In our paper we shall try to apply a semiotic analysis to illness as represented in E. Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*. For this, we shall resort to Ch. S. Peirce's theory of signs and his triadic model of the sign (*representamen* – the form which the sign takes; *interpretant* – the sense made of the sign; *object* – something beyond the sign to which it refers, a referent, i.e. what the word "illness" or its synonyms refer to, for example, the illness of alcoholism and its physical, mental and social effects, or the illness of patriarchalism and its effects upon women and children, as well as upon society at large) [16, p. 278-275]. Generally speaking, a sign is "anything – a

colour, a gesture, a wink, an object, a mathematical equation, etc. – that stands for something other than itself"[4, p. 4]. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but, according to Peirce, such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning: "Nothing is a sign unless we interpret it as a sign"[*apud* 3, p. 13].

Victorian society rules and women's oppression and dis-possession generated a gendered discourse in the literature of that period, marked by signs of women's rebellion against, and critique of, patriarchalism.

Emily Brontë's use of interrelated metaphors of illness, vampires and ghosts is a relevant and poignant critique against an oppressive patriarchal system crushing women's dreams and destinies.

## 2. A Semiotic Approach to Illness

### 2. 1. Modalization as a Symptomof Illness

In this section of our paper, we shall attempt to show how modalization in speech (as defined by Halliday in his book *Functional Grammar*), becomes a symptom[1] (from a semiotic perspective) of illness:

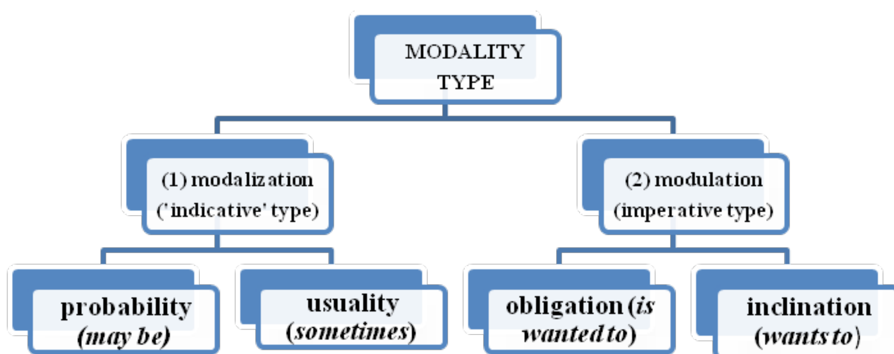


Figure 1: *Types of modality: modalization and modulation [10, p. 358]*



In other words, illness manifests itself in the sick character's language, making it appear hallucinatory and hesitating. In his book, *An Introduction toFunctional Grammar* (1994), M. A. K. Halliday distinguishes between two types of modality: "modalization" and "modulation" (See Fig. 1).

M. A. K. Halliday further distinguishes between two types of "orientation", in order to identify whether the speaker is explicitly involved in the activity (explicitness of speaker involvement) (See Fig. 2):

Figure 2: *System of orientations in modality [10, p. 358]*

The "value/strength of modality" refers to the strength or power of the modality. M. A. K. Halliday does not present it as a scale but as a system of possible choices available for the speaker (Table 1):

| | **Probability** | **Usuality** | **Obligation** | **Inclination** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **high** | certain | always | required | determined |
| **median** | probable | usually | supposed | keen |
| **low** | possible | sometimes | allowed | willing |

Table 1: *Halliday's three "values" of modality*

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine becomes ill because of a *discrepancy* between her inner and outer realities: living outside of societal norms with Heathcliff versus living well within society's bounds with Edgar, but separated from Heathcliff [11, p. 6]. This discrepancy results in a tearing of her psyche and her struggle with her realities leads to a transference of illness to Heathcliff. This discrepancy generates moments of hesitation:Catherine's hallucinations and dreams increase until she dies; at that point hesitation is transferred upon Heathcliff and spread to the framed narrators, pervading the novel. These moments of hesitation are manifested on a linguistic level through the characters' (predominately Cathy, Heathcliff and Nelly) use of modalization: "Modalization is a linguistic term relating to how one verb can influence the mood of or destabilize or contradict the other. Modalization consists in using certain introductory locutions which, without changing the meaning of the sentence, modigy the relation between the speaker and his utterance" [Todorov, *apud* 11, p. 6], for example 'claim' vs. 'make a claim', 'feel' vs 'have a feeling'.

Nelly's language illustrates modalization, through the use of verbs that change the mood of a phrase, foreshadowing Edgar's impending unhappiness: "[He]… *believed* himself the happiest man alive" (Brontë, p. 110). Ambiguity also surrounds Cathy's happiness. After Cathy and Edgar are moved into Thrushcross Grange, Nelly says: "Catherine had seasons of gloom and silence, now and then; they were respected with sympathizing silence by her husband, who ascribed them to an alteration in her constitution produced by her perilous illness, as she was never subject to depression of spirits before" (Brontë, p. 113).

Ambiguity is present in the novel from the very beginning: modalization is visible in Lockwood's quite frequent use of the verb "seem", upon his arrival at the Heights. This verb is used by Lockwood in relation to Heathcliff (Brontë, p. 3), Cathy (Brontë, p. 11) and the beasts from Wuthering Heights (Brontë, p. 14). The novel thus begins on a note of ambiguity and uncertainty, which is continued with the description of Lockwood's dream in Cathy's room: "I seemed to keep them closed above a quarter of an hour, yet, the instant I listened again, there was the doleful cry moaning on!"(Brontë, p. 21).

According to S. R. Gorsky, Cathy's proposed marriage to Edgar suits the veneer with which civilized society covers raw nature, fitting her socially determined role [9, p. 181]. If Heathcliff were not involved, choosing to marry Edgar would not cause Cathy to suffer a psychological split. Moreover, Cathy is aware of the financial politics of middle-class marriage and intends to use her elevated socio-economic status and wealth to support Heathcliff after she and Edgar are married. Modalization is also visible in Cathy's expectations of Edgar: "Edgar *must* shake off his antipathy, and tolerate him [Heathcliff], at least. He will when he learns my true feelings towards him" [my emphasis] (Brontë, p. 64).

Cathy and Heathcliff areboth alienated, emotionally deprived children who feel a profound affinity with each other and who cling to each other with passionate intensity: they seem to be engaged, in effect, in a mutual morbid dependency which is so intense that they do not have a sense of themselves as autonomous beings with separate identities; each feels that existence is unbearable without the other. The degree of their need for each other is the product not only of their alienation from the world around them, but also of their alienation from themselves [14, p. 108]: "If all else perished, andheremained, I *should* still continue to be; and, if all else remained,and he were annihilated, the Universe *would* turn to a mightystranger. I *should* not see me a part of it [my emphasis]"(Brontë, p. 64).

Heathcliff's departure creates an intense reaction in Cathy. She becomes fevered and delirious, and when she emerges from her illness she is saucier, more passionate, and haughtier than ever: Dr. Kenneth warns the household against aggravating her fiery temper (Brontë, p. 109). Cathy's reaction is mirrored in a gothic storm; that is, her psychological splitting is manifested in the weather. Nelly reports "It was a very dark evening for summer: the clouds *appeared* inclined to thunder… About midnight, while we still sat up, the storm came rattling over the Heights in full fury [my emphasis]" [*idem*, p. 105-106].

Cathy exhibits signs of melancholia (due to her split from Heathcliff and torn psyche); however, Edgar ascribes her symptoms to her initial illness. For a period after her first illness, which is set off by Heathcliff leaving the Heights, Cathy is relatively happy – stable – in her social role married to Edgar living at the Grange. B. Gorsky considers Cathy's position at this point, the veneer with which civilized society covers raw nature [9, p. 189]; more precisely, in marrying Edgar, she fulfils her social role but denies her own nature and identity, and it is this splitting of her realities or selves which makes her ill. Heathcliff's return causes Cathy to re-examine her relationships with Edgar and Heathcliff. When Cathy realizes she cannot have both Edgar as her husband and Heathcliff as her friend she tries to manipulate those around her with her illness: this strategy ultimately fails,

leading to her psyche tearing for the second (and final) time. Before Heathcliff returns, Nelly describes Cathy's emotional state: "for the space of half a year the gunpowder lay as harmless as sand, because no fire came near 40 to explode it" (Brontë, p. 112).

Heathcliff's return underscores the sameness between him and Cathy as well as her differences with Edgar. Prior to Cathy and Heathcliff's reunion, Nelly comments that "[b]oth the room and its occupants [Cathy and Edgar], and the scene they gazed on, *looked* wondrously peaceful [my emphasis]" (Brontë, p. 114). Strikingly, Brontë filters Nelly's language using ambiguity: Cathy and Edgar are not peaceful, but rather, look peaceful. Cathy is peaceful, she "s[its] and she quit[s] rooms" [*ibidem*]. She appears to fit the mould of the genteel woman: that is, a refined woman content with the routines of domesticity and the genteel indoor leisure pursuits of the parlour, a room Wuthering Heights lacks. When Heathcliff returns, Catherine is no longer passive and quiet: "She flew upstairs … flinging her arms round his neck, dart[ed] off, sprang forward, rose, and seized Heathcliff's hands again." [*idem*, p. 114-116]. Heathcliff renews in her a wildness: an activity which has been quiet under the social veneer. Nelly says that "Cathy seized Heathcliff's hands again, and laughed like one beside herself" (emphasis mine, 116). She uses the possessive to note that Cathy is Edgar's wife, "his lady" [*idem*, p. 116]. But her last comment can be read two ways: Cathy is either beside herself metaphorically, in a state of uncontrollable emotion, a state of extreme excitement; or, prepositionally, Cathy is beside herself. If Heathcliff and Cathy are one then Cathy is beside herself (her own self figured as Heathcliff). Cathy's phrasing highlights a complete merging of identity as her psyche tries desperately to fuse itself back together with Heathcliff's [12, p. 53]. However, Nelly notes the pure annoyance that crosses Edgar's face at the reunion of Cathy and Heathcliff (Brontë, p. 116). Their desperate attempts to merge psyches fail when Edgar throws Heathcliff out of Thrushcross Grange after overhearing Cathy offering his sister Isabella as a wife for Heathcliff. Cathy's manipulation through illness is not subtle; she declares: "Well, if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend – if Edgar will be mean and jealous – I'll try to break their hearts by breaking my own. That *will* be a prompt way of finishing all, when I am pushed to extremity [my emphasis]" [*idem*, p. 133]. While Cathy assumes that breaking her own heart will break Edgar's (that he will be upset because he loves her), in the case of Heathcliff (because they are one), to break her heart is to break his as well. Heathcliff, however, is not the target of her manipulation. She asks Nelly to say to Edgar, if you see him again to-night, that I'm in danger of being seriously ill – I wish it may prove true. […] I want to frighten him [*idem*, p. 133]. Cathy appears to be aware that she cannot will herself to be ill in order to prove a point, but shesays I

wish it may prove true. Wishing, when said aloud, is a form of what Austin calls performative speech, and an instance of behabitives, which have to do with social, conventional behaviour.

As her illness progresses, Cathy develops hysteria and brain fever and her mental integrity collapses. Cathy's struggle between Heathcliff and Edgar can also be affixed to hysteria, given that unexpressed sexual desire for Heathcliff surfaces when he returns. L. Krishnan writes: "Brontë implies that, lacking wholeness of self, Cathy disintegrates internally" [13, p. 9]. Whether or not Cathy wills her illness into existence (through the use of illocution), she becomes ill. According to B. Gorsky: "the recognition that Cathy cannot have both Edgar and Heathcliff provides the catalyst that transforms her chronic unhappiness into acute emotional illness, manifested as depression, anorexia, and perhaps unconsciously willed death" [9, p. 182]. The key to understanding Cathy's illnesses as somatoform disorders is that her severe emotional distress in isolating herself from Heathcliff (therefore from herself, resulting in an internal split) is transformed or manifested as a physical illness. Emily Brontë "connects psychological illness to emotional causes and to physical illness" [9, p. 176]. The illnesses manifest themselves as conversion, or somatoform, disorders: "unexplained physical symptoms indicate the conversion of unconscious emotional conflicts into a more acceptable form" [5, p. 178]. Nelly describes Cathy's body "as exhausted" (Brontë, p. 139). Seizures are often listed as common symptoms of conversion disorders. Following her argument with Edgar regarding her relationship with Heathcliff, Cathy says "I fell on the floor … how certain I felt of having a fit … I had no command of tongue, or brain, and [Linton] did not guess my agony" (Brontë, p. 139); this description is of a seizure. Cathy mentions Linton and how he did not understand her relationship with Heathcliff, which points to the conversion of her anxiety into the symptoms she lists: a perfect example of a somatoform disorder in action.





### 2. 2. Illness, Vampires and Ghosts – icons of Disorder and Doubt

During the Victorian period, "medical and fictional narratives participated in a rhetoric of the nervous body that constructed it as a cultural symbol, an icon of disorder and doubt"[20, p. 5].

The illness of civilization and patriarchal culture is rendered in *Wuthering Heights* by the metaphors of two supernatural creatures—the vampire (male) and the ghost (female) – as two sides of the same coin – and by images of the most symbolic illnesses in the novel, consumption and intemperance: The "images of vampires underscore patriarchy's emphasis on 'possession' while images of ghosts render visible 'dispossession' and the powerlessness of the dispossessed" [18, p. 95]. Consequently, throughout *Wuthering Heights*, images of vampires and ghosts are interwoven with illness – with "consumption" and "intemperance" being two of Brontë's most symbolic

illnesses: "[…] knocking my knuckles through the glass, and stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch; instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand! The intense horror of nightmare came over me: I tried to draw back my arm, but the hand clung to it, and a most melancholy voice sobbed, 'Let me in - let me in!'" (Brontë, p. 20).

In the third chapter of the novel, Catherine's ghost appears in Lockwood's nightmare during the night spent in her chamber. This paranormal figure with the icy hand who claims to have been "a waif for twenty years" [*idem*, p. 21] could just be a figment of Lockwood's nightmares. Still, when Heathcliff demands an explanation for the commotion in the oak-panelled bed (which he clearly thinks involves Catherine's ghost), Lockwood answers that "I suppose that she (the servant, Zillah) wanted to get another proof that the place was haunted, at my expense. Well, it is – swarming with ghosts and goblins! You have reason in shutting it up, I assure you. No one will thank you for a doze in such a den!" (Brontë, p. 22). As readers, we accept his interpretation because Lockwood is our narrator, but his characterizations can also be wildly inaccurate, reflecting his own biases and assumptions, as with his description of Catherine's ghost as a "little fiend" who may have been seeking entry into the window in order to strangle him. As he further describes her, "And that minx, Catherine Linton, or Earnshaw, or however she was called – she must have been a changeling – wicked little soul!" [*idem*, p. 22].

Cathy's ghost iconically represents the situation of all acculturated women under a patriarchal system, which denies them bodily presence through the process of dis/possession. The self-alienation inherent in becoming a proper lady is disease producing. As Gilbert and Gubar proclaim, "to be a lady is to be diseased" [18, p. 268]. Cathy's ghostly reappearance after death simply represents the most extreme case because Brontë represents the other female characters' fading away in life. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Frances is "already half a ghost" [*ibidem*] and that "As a metaphor, Frances's tuberculosis means that she is in an advanced state of just that social 'consumption' which will eventually kill Catherine, too" [*idem*, p. 268–269]. Isabella also begins her descent into a ghostlike presence when she pleads "ill health" (Brontë., p. 79) and Nelly comments, "she was dwindling and fading before our eyes" [*ibidem*]. In addition, Isabella's move to the south, near London, effectively makes her a ghost-like presence in the text long before her death finalizes this point. In fact, all of the married women within the novel can be seen to cast their ghostly presence over the book because they all, save one, become ill and die years before their husbands. Mrs. Earnshaw dies four years before Mr. Earnshaw. Frances's death following the birth of Hareton occurs four-and-a-half years before Hindley's death. Cathy's death in childbirth occurs eighteen years before

Edgar’s death. Isabella’s escape from Heathcliff probably adds years to her life, yet she still dies five years before Heathcliff. The illness of Emily Brontë’s female characters serve to highlight a patriarchal culture’s dis/possession of women and its dependence upon the denial and death of women’s bodies, which culturally mirrors its dependence upon the death and denial of nature.

In many ways, the ghosts in *Wuthering Heights* symbolize a lack of closure for the lovers. Heathcliff wants to believe in ghosts and the afterlife because that means Catherine will still be around. When Catherine dies, he begs to be haunted: “Oh! you said you cared nothing for my sufferings! And I pray one prayer – I repeat it till my tongue stiffens – Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living; you said I killed you – haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” (Brontë, p. 130).

Brontë’s ghosts are not the average Gothic novel device, as they seem to have much more to do with romance than evil. The superstitious Joseph may be the only one to see the ghosts as sinister. Even in their childhood, Catherine and Heathcliff feared nothing – though violence and rage were an everyday experience. The ghosts that children usually fear were not scary to them because they had each other. They were wandering over the moors, talking about and doing a lot of uncanny things: “It’s a rough journey, and a sad heart to travel it; and we must pass by Gimmerton Kirk to go that journey! We’ve braved its ghosts often together, and dared each other to stand among the graves and ask them to come” (Brontë, p. 99).

Through these interrelated metaphors of vampires, ghosts and illness, Brontë portrays her dark vision of Civilization’s distortion of Nature. In Brontë’s world, culture suffers from the dis-ease of dis/possession causing gentlemen to become vampires and ladies to become ghosts.’

Making usage of illness and death again, Emily Brontë bestows to Isabella the same tragic end of the majority of feminine characters in the novel. She dies of consumption, about thirteen years after Catherine’s death, and through her and her son, the tyrant gains Thrushcross Grange. Catherine Earnshaw (the mother) and her sister-in-law, Isabella Linton, are the two feminine characters through which Brontë illustrates how Victorian social ills and frustrations induces bodily illness and even death [see 2, p. 638-649].

**2. 3. Illness – Icon of Displacement, Dispossession and Exile**

Heathcliff enters the novel possessing nothing, he is not even given a last or family name, and loses his privileged status after Mr. Earnshaw's death.

Heathcliff displaces Hindley in the family structure: "Old Earnshaw took to Heathcliff strangely, believing all he said (for that matter, he said precious little, and generally the truth) and petting him up''(Brontë, p. 30). Given this, "he bred bad feeling in the house; [...] the young master had learnt to regard his father as an oppressor rather than a friend, and Heathcliff as a usurper of his parent's affections and his privileges, and he grew bitter with brooding over these injuries" (Brontë, p. 31). All these displacements and losses of privileges and dispossessions, followed one by another throughout the novel, generate suffering and frustration in the characters' souls, having as result their bodily and also mental illnesses, manifested into their revengeful behaviour and horrifying exploits one to another. How is this possible? The old Earnshaw's death brings Heathcliff's displacement and dispossession of his prior rights and position in the family: "Hindley became tyrannical. A few words from her, evincing a dislike to Heathcliff, were enough to rouse in him all his old hatred of the boy. He drove him from their company to the servants, deprived him of the instructions of the curate, and insisted that he should labour out of doors instead, compelling him to do so, as hard as any other lad on the farm" (Brontë, p. 36). Later, Heathcliff, in his turn, taking advantage of Hindley's decay, behaves like a beast: "The ruffian kicked and trampled on him, and dashed his head repeatedly against the flags, holding me with one hand, meantime, to prevent me summoning Joseph" [*idem*, p. 138]. After Hindley's death, all his fortune is claimed by Heathcliff, being the creditor of the first one in discussion: "His father died in debt", he said; "the whole property is mortgaged, and the sole chance for the natural heir is to allow him an opportunity of creating some interest in the creditor's heart, that he may be inclined to deal leniently towards him" [*idem*, p. 144]. In this way, Heathcliff's revenge is taken to term through Hareton's dispossession of his rights and fortune.

Catherine's tragic destiny, caused by her in her exile at Grange and confinement imposed by Victorian rigid Civilisation, is expressed and foretold by the metaphors from her dream: "I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy" (Brontë, p. 63). Catherine is thrown out of heaven, where she feels displaced, sees herself an exile at Thrushcross Grange at the end, and wanders the moors for twenty years as a ghost.

Hareton is dispossessed of property, education, and social status. Isabella cannot return to her beloved Thrushcross Grange and brother. Linton (Heathcliff's son) is displaced twice after his mother's death, being removed first to Thrushcross Grange and then to Wuthering Heights. Cathy is displaced from her home, Thrushcross Grange. Linton's illness determines

her to marry and follow him to Wuthering Heights, this marriage, bringing her dispossession: "[...] talking to Doctor Kenneth, who says uncle is dying, truly, at last. I'm glad, for I shall be master of the Grange after him—and Catherine always spoke of it as her house. It isn't hers! It's mine—papa says everything she has is mine. All her nice books are mine; she offered to give me them, and her pretty birds, and her pony Minny, if I would get the key of our room, and let her out; but I told her she had nothing to give, they were all, all mine" (Brontë, p. 214).

In conclusion, we may argue that all tragic happenings in *Wuthering Heights* are caused by the illness of displacement, exile and dispossession.

**2. 4. The Alteration of the Body – Index for Illness**

Cathy is physically altered by her illness: "her present countenance had a wild vindictiveness in its white cheek, and a bloodless lip" (Brontë, p. 168). Cathy's changed appearance suggests that her illnesses are rooted in the somatoform family. For Nelly, Cathy's appearance is connected to the unearthly, the dead. Cathy experiences self-reflexive moments about her illness; she says, 'Why am I so changed'? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words? I'm sure I should be myself were I once among the heather on those hills' (Brontë, p. 140). Like Edgar and Nelly, Cathy believes that if she can be connected to nature she can fuse her psyche together. However, as previously discussed this is not the case; Cathy's urgent need to be connected to nature could be a translation of her connection between Heathcliff and nature (particularly the heaths of Wuthering Heights).

*Wuthering Heights* is more than illustrative for the usage of psychosomatics, characters as Catherine Earnshaw, her brother Hindley Earnshaw, Heathcliff and Edgar Linton suffering of bodily illnesses as a result of their grief, falling into despondency, frustrations or depressive states of mind.



Cathy Earnshaw makes herself a victim of illness and death because of not being capable of facing her new social status as Edgar's wife. Her frustration for having lost the freedom of being with her soul-mate Heathcliff, makes her fall into despondency, this state of mind bringing her physical illness (the brain fever) and then, her death. The same thing had happened to her brother and to her husband, who's falling into despondency caused by the loss of the loved woman brought to them bodily illnesses which, finally, kill them.

According to S. R. Gorsky, the Victorian woman was "pale, passive, reluctant to eat, and prone to faint: this is a description of the idealized nineteenth-century woman" [9, p. 173]. The author further argues that "While she seems unhealthy to modern eyes… [t]o her society, and especially to its literature, the delicate woman was healthy" [*idem*, p. 173]. If

the idealized nineteenth-century woman did not live within the societal confines of her role, she could expect to fall ill – to suffer a breakdown of body or spirit, develop melancholia or palpitations, enter a decline, perhaps die [*idem*, p. 173]. Culture played a large role in a woman's ability to stay in good health, and in the construction of any illnesses she might contract. This assertion is not new; many scholars have written about Victorian illnesses and the role of culture. In this section of our paper, we shall approach nineteenth-century illnesses such as hysteria and anorexia as somatoform disorders, from a psycho-social point of view, translating Cathy's illness into contemporary twentieth-century terms, thus revealing her illnesses to be more than merely mental.

A. Vrettos explains the power of illness to make one's own body seem alien, to transgress somatic and psychic boundaries, or to link disparate groups of people through the process of contagion suggest[s] the potential instability of human identity [20, p. 2-3]. Cathy mistakes the black press, or mirror, at Thrushcross Grange for the one that she used to have at Wuthering Heights. Nelly narrates the chilling anxiety that Cathy experiences in not being about to recognize herself in the mirror: "It does appear odd – I see a face in it! Don't you see that face? she [Cathy] enquired, gazing earnestly at the mirror. And say what I [Nelly] could, I was incapable of making her comprehend it to be her own; so I rose and covered it with a shawl. Its behind there still! she pursued, anxiously. And it stirred. Who is it? I hope it will not come out when you are gone! Oh! Nelly, the room is haunted! I'm afraid of being alone!… There's nobody here! I insisted. It was yourself, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since. Myself, she gasped, and the clock is striking twelve! It's true then; that's dreadful" (Brontë, p. 138)!

Cathy thinks that she sees her own ghostly double or dopplegänger in the mirror; the dopplegänger is traditionally regarded as an omen of one's own death. In her hysterical state, Cathy reads omens into feathers and mirrors. Thus it makes sense that Cathy's mind would immediately jump to the mirror from her childhood.

Illness's power to make one's own body seem alien is at its height when one considers body dysmorphic disorder. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a somatoform disorder in which the affected person is excessively concerned about and preoccupied by a perceived defect in his or her physical features [15, p. 396-397]. A common example of BDD that is connected intimately to Cathy and Heathcliff is anorexia. Dependent relationships (like the one Cathy and Heathcliff share) are symptoms of BDD.

Catherine's reclusion and self-starvation have very serious consequences upon her life. The effects of these are the self-alienation followed by severe

crisis of hysteria, fever – "She could not bear the notion which I had put into her head of Mr. Linton's philosophical resignation. Tossing about, she increased her feverish bewilderment to madness, and tore the pillow with her teeth; then raising herself up all burning […]" (Brontë, p. 95) and delirium: "There's nobody here!" I insisted. "It was yourself, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since"; "That is the glass—the mirror, Mrs. Linton; and you see yourself in it, and there am I too, by your side" [*idem*, p. 97].

Another victim of illness – consumption- is Linton Heathcliff, "a pale, delicate, effeminate boy", with "a sickly peevishness in his aspect" (Brontë, p. 155) as Nelly Dean depicted him, describing the effects of his illness: "for he lived almost as secluded as Catherine herself, and was never to be seen. I could gather from her (from Wuthering Heights' housekeeper) that he continued in weak health, and was a tiresome inmate" and "or else lay in bed all day, for he was constantly getting coughs, and colds, and aches, and pains of some sort" (Brontë, p. 163). His death, quite feasibly occurring soon, gives Cathy back the freedom she should never have lost, though it also gives the tyrant Heathcliff the revenge he has worked for: triumph over the Lintons and possession of Thrushcross Grange.

**3. Conclusions**

Our aim has been to provide a deeper understanding of the images of illness in *Wuthering Heights*, in order to propose a model for looking at depictions of illness in other (Victorian) novels as well. We have attempted to show how modalization in speech semiotically turns into a symptom of illness. Illness manifests itself in the sick character's language, making it appear hallucinatory and hesitating. On the one hand, the use of verbs such as "seem" or "appear" indicate a discrepancy between reality and appearance in relation to a character. This discrepancy between reality and desire in the sick character's life leads to moments of hesitation, which are also visible in the character's speech. We have also tried to look at images of ghosts and vampires in the novel as icons of illness. Illness has also been approached as an icon of disorder and doubt in relation to Victorian realities and expectations, for example the clash between true love and conventional marriage. This paper may constitute a starting point for further investigations into the theme of illness and various approaches that may be applied to discuss it. Recent studies [19], [9] on images of illness in Victorian novels have even begun to discuss it in relation to such terms as anorexia or monomania. Approaching the multitude of illnesses represented in the novel supports in understanding the larger metaphorical disease that they represent, the disease of dis/possession, which Brontë uses to critique her culture's disease-producing values of possession and dispossession, causing man to become vampires and ladies to become ghosts. Through these interrelated metaphors of vampires, ghosts and illness, Brontë pleads for her deep love for Nature and express her protest against Civilization's distortion of Nature. It is a world where self-interest results in men being disconnected from each other and alienated from themselves.

**Note**

[1]According to Peirce's second trichotomy of signs [16, p. 274-284], based on the relation of *representation* (the sign-object relationship), there are: *iconic* signs – by some kind of analogy, the properties of the sign correspond to the qualities of the object; for example, a photograph, a diagram, a painting are all iconic signs; the *indexical* sign – the sign is really affected by the object; for example, a knock on the door is the index of a visit; the symptom of an illness is the index of that illness; the *symbolic* sign refers to its object by virtue of a general and effective law, a convention of the community; for example, banknotes, passwords, tickets to a show and the words of a language are symbols. See also [1, p. 29].

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**Text**

Brontë E. Wuthering Heights. London: Penguin Books, 1985.