

# Illness as Metaphor in Contemporary Autobiographies: A Theoretical and Methodological Study

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## Abstract

This research article explores the use of illness as a metaphor in contemporary autobiographies, focusing on two key texts: *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying* by Nina Riggs and *The Unwinding of the Miracle: A Memoir of Life, Death, and Everything That Comes After* by Julie Yip-Williams. Using Susan Sontag's theoretical framework from *Illness as Metaphor*, this paper investigates how these memoirs use illness not only as a literal experience but also as a symbolic representation of broader existential, social, and philosophical themes. By applying narrative analysis as the primary research methodology, the article examines how the metaphor of illness shapes these autobiographical narratives, reflecting on identity, mortality, and the human condition.

**Keywords:** metaphor, narrative analysis, identity, mortality, and the human condition.

## Introduction

The intersection of illness and autobiography has become an important theme in contemporary literature, where authors use their personal experiences with terminal illnesses as a lens to explore deeper philosophical questions about life, death, and the self. Illness becomes more than a physical condition in these works- it serves as a potent metaphor for larger existential dilemmas, social structures, and personal identity.

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) remains a key text in the critique of how illness is often metaphorized in literature and culture. Sontag argued that society tends to overlay illnesses, particularly terminal ones, with metaphorical meanings that can stigmatize or romanticize the experience of the patient. However, in the realm of autobiographical writing, authors often deliberately employ illness as a metaphor to narrate their own confrontation with death and meaning.

This paper investigates how illness functions as a metaphor in two contemporary autobiographies: *The Bright Hour* by Nina Riggs and *The Unwinding of the Miracle* by Julie Yip-Williams. Both authors chronicle their battles with terminal cancer, and in doing so, offer a deeply personal exploration of illness as not only a physical reality but also a metaphor for life, death, and everything in between. By employing narrative analysis, this article situates their work within Sontag's framework while also demonstrating how autobiographical illness narratives have evolved.

### **Theoretical Framework: Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor***

Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* critiques the ways in which society projects metaphorical meanings onto diseases, particularly cancer and tuberculosis. Sontag argues that these metaphors often serve to stigmatize the patient or create unnecessary fear and mystification around the illness. In Sontag's view, illnesses should be understood in strictly medical terms, free from the cultural baggage of metaphorical interpretation.

Sontag's primary argument is that the metaphorization of illness is both harmful and misleading. By linking illness to personal or moral failure, society distorts the experience of the sick and adds unnecessary layers of judgment. For instance, cancer is often discussed in militaristic terms as a "battle" that one must "win"- which can lead to feelings of shame or failure in patients who cannot "defeat" their illness.

Despite Sontag's powerful critique, illness continues to function as a metaphor in much contemporary literature, particularly in autobiographies. For authors like Riggs and Yip-Williams, illness serves as a gateway to understanding broader aspects of the human condition. This paper applies Sontag's framework while acknowledging that autobiographers often use illness metaphors not to stigmatize but to explore deep existential questions.

### **Research Methodology: Narrative Analysis in Illness Autobiographies**

To investigate how illness functions as a metaphor in contemporary autobiographies, this research employs narrative analysis. Narrative analysis focuses on the structure, content, and function of stories, and is especially useful in understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. In the context of illness narratives, narrative analysis helps to uncover how authors use the metaphor of illness to convey their experiences of life, death, and identity.

By examining the narrative structure of *The Bright Hour* and *The Unwinding of the Miracle*, this methodology reveals how both authors frame their illness as part of a larger journey. This analysis also explores how metaphors of illness are woven into the personal reflections, offering insights into the ways in which autobiographers use illness to explore their own mortality.

### ***The Bright Hour* by Nina Riggs: Illness as a Metaphor for Living and Dying**

Nina Riggs's memoir, *The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying* (2017), tells the story of her battle with metastatic breast cancer. Riggs writes with humor and grace, focusing not only on her illness but also on the everyday joys and challenges of life. In her narrative, illness becomes a metaphor for the fragility and beauty of life itself.

Riggs often reflects on the concept of time, using her cancer diagnosis as a way to explore the tension between the urgency of living and the inevitability of dying. Illness in *The Bright Hour* is not just a personal crisis; it becomes a lens through which Riggs examines what it means to live a meaningful life in the face of death. For instance, she writes about the contrast between the mundane tasks of daily life-making breakfast for her children, walking the dog- and the looming reality of her terminal diagnosis. These everyday moments become imbued with a sense of heightened importance, as Riggs uses illness as a metaphor to reflect on the intersection of life and death.

The title of Riggs's memoir itself reflects this metaphorical approach. *The Bright Hour* suggests a fleeting moment of clarity or brightness in the midst of darkness, mirroring how Riggs views her remaining time. In this sense, her illness becomes a metaphor for the finite nature of life and the ways in which we find light, even in dark circumstances.

### ***The Unwinding of the Miracle* by Julie Yip-Williams: Illness as Metaphor for Control and Acceptance**

Julie Yip-Williams's memoir, *The Unwinding of the Miracle* (2019), tells the story of her life from her early days as a blind child in Vietnam to her eventual diagnosis with terminal colon cancer. In contrast to Riggs, Yip-Williams's narrative emphasizes illness as a metaphor for control and acceptance. Her memoir is deeply reflective, as she grapples with the loss of control over her body and her life.

Yip-Williams approaches her illness with a combination of practicality and philosophical inquiry. She frequently reflects on the idea of "unwinding," using her terminal diagnosis as a metaphor for the gradual unraveling of life. As the cancer progresses, Yip-Williams explores the concept of fate, questioning whether her life has followed a predetermined path. Illness, in this case, becomes a metaphor for the loss of control, as she learns to accept the inevitability of death.

Like Riggs, Yip-Williams also reflects on the meaning of life, but her narrative is more focused on the concept of legacy. She writes for her children, aiming to leave behind a record of her thoughts and experiences, much like Riggs does. Illness in *The Unwinding of the Miracle* serves as a metaphor for both the finality of life and the continuation of legacy, offering a sense of permanence even in the face of death.

### **Comparative Analysis: Illness as Metaphor in Riggs and Yip-Williams**

Both *The Bright Hour* and *The Unwinding of the Miracle* use illness as a central metaphor, but they do so in different ways. Riggs's memoir focuses on the duality of living and dying, using illness as a metaphor for the fleeting nature of life and the importance of finding joy in small moments. Yip-Williams, on the other hand, explores illness as a metaphor for control and acceptance, reflecting on the inevitability of fate and the legacy one leaves behind.

While both authors are influenced by their terminal diagnoses, their narratives reveal different attitudes toward illness as a metaphor. Riggs uses illness to highlight the beauty of life, even in its final moments, whereas Yip-Williams emphasizes the gradual "unwinding" of life and the acceptance of death's certainty. In this way, both autobiographies contribute to a richer understanding of how illness functions as a metaphor for life's fundamental questions.

### **Conclusion**

Illness as metaphor remains a potent and complex narrative tool in contemporary autobiographies, as exemplified by *The Bright Hour* and *The Unwinding of the Miracle*. While Susan Sontag critiqued the use of illness as a metaphor, these memoirs demonstrate that metaphor can serve a deeply personal and existential function. For Riggs and Yip-Williams, illness becomes a way to explore life's most profound questions—about time, control, identity, and legacy.

Through narrative analysis, this paper has shown how both authors use illness to convey their inner experiences, turning their terminal diagnoses into metaphors that reflect broader human concerns. Ultimately, these autobiographies suggest that illness, while devastating, can also serve as a powerful metaphor for understanding what it means to live and die.

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