

An Unsuccessful Power Grab:

Inheritance of Feminine Invalidism and Rebellion of “Sick” Women in *Wuthering Heights*

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1. Introduction

Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) highlights women’s “illness,” especially eating disorders and madness. In this paper, “illness” refers to genuine illness and malingering. Feminine invalidism characterized by illness seems to have two contradictory attributes. On the one hand, women’s illness suggests the innate defectiveness of women, which is adored in patriarchal culture. On the other hand, women can take advantage of the power within illness to coerce others into obedience. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English believe, a physical or mental disorder among women was sometimes explained as “a power grab rather than a genuine illness” (85) in the Victorian era. This paper mainly solves two problems: where does feminine invalidism come from? Is “illness” a successful strategy for women to subvert gender roles within their families?

2. An “Inheritance” between Symbolic Stepmother and Stepdaughter

In this section, I present the “maternal inheritance” of feminine weakness in the Frances-Catherine-Isabella succession. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that Catherine Earnshaw has not realized the social sickness of womanhood until adolescence, when her symbolic stepparents, Hindley and Frances, become the new owners of *Wuthering Heights* (269). As a “stepmother,” Frances plays a critical role in awakening Catherine’s gender consciousness by casting a shadow of feminine weakness on her. As a hysterical and timid woman, Frances becomes an incarnation of illness and sickens adolescent Catherine, thus threatening the 12-year-old girl. Catherine fears but has to enter womanhood, which indicates “to be a lady is to be diseased” (Gilbert and Gubar 268). Catherine is bitten by the bulldog at Thrushcross Grange, which has a sexual connotation. It symbolizes that physically Catherine becomes a woman. Then, after five weeks’ residence at Thrushcross Grange, Catherine suppresses her wild nature and does not refuse to enter the sickening womanhood under the influence of Frances. After Catherine suffers from the brain fever, a genuine illness, she becomes an heiress of Frances who represents the stereotypical sick woman.

Besides Frances and Catherine, the pattern of a relationship between the symbolic stepmother and stepdaughter is repetitious between Catherine and Isabella, but in that case, Isabella subverts the stereotype of a weak lady by another attribute of the feminine invalidism, the monstrous power of “illness.” Like Catherine, adolescent Isabella is guided by her symbolic stepparents, Catherine and Edgar, into the diseased womanhood. When Isabella is eighteen years old, she falls in love with Heathcliff, which is opposed by Edgar and Catherine. However, ignoring Catherine’s warning, Isabella is headstrong on her decision to love Heathcliff, who is a villain. Isabella protests against Catherine by fasting and feigning illness. It seems like that she inherits a positive attribute of feminine invalidism which endows women with power to rebel against authorities in the family.

Thus, the “sick” role of women is defined by patriarchal culture and feminine invalidism is passed on by women.

3. Eating disorders

In *Wuthering Heights*, both Catherine and Isabella show signs of eating disorders. This section analyzes different meanings of refusal to eat in the cases of Isabella and Catherine. After Isabella has a dispute with Catherine, Isabella refuses to eat her breakfast and she admits that she feigns illness for complaining about Catherine. In Isabella’s case, in contrast to the symptom of a genuine illness, fasting is a strategy to arouse others’ sympathy and to defy her “stepmother” who discourages her from associating with Heathcliff. Yet, in Catherine’s case, her loss of appetite is a self-punishment for her powerlessness to revolt against her elder brother Hindley, who locks Heathcliff up. Although Catherine worries about Heathcliff, as an obedient woman, she cannot argue with Hindley aggressively before the Lintons. Her refusal to eat is a compromise for her dilemma because she does not lose her decency as a lady while suffering hunger with Heathcliff together to prove her loyalty to him.

4. Catherine’s delirium

Catherine's delirium suggests the monstrous power of feminine invalidism, which subverts traditional gender roles. Following the suggestions from Doctor Kenneth, Edgar is obedient to Catherine who has not recovered from her brain fever after marriage, so that Catherine's delirium will not recrudescence. There is a contradiction in preventing Catherine from going mad. Edgar becomes an advocate of Catherine's feminine power, and he uses his patriarchal power to maintain Catherine's autonomy. It seems like that Catherine is the dominator, and she reverses the traditional gender roles. However, Edgar restrains Catherine's emotion by making her suppress the passion, which explodes in anger and causes madness. Sharing his power with Catherine for a short time is Edgar's strategy to shape a real angel in the house, but his plan fails with the return of Heathcliff.

Catherine wants to keep a friendship with Heathcliff, and she tries to pretend to be mad to threaten her husband in order to grab power. Using the strategy of "illness," Catherine knows that Edgar will give in to her pleading. Yet, it seems like that once Catherine becomes a diseased woman, she loses the power to bring the illness under her control freely. The power of illness controls her body and manipulates her emotions when she suffers from mental illness. Although she is cared for as if she were a queen by others, her conscious mind is too weak to wield the power given by feminine invalidism during the attack and convalescence. When Catherine is conscious of her powerlessness to maintain equality between her and her husband forever, she slides into depression again, which causes a relapse of mental illness. Restraining and releasing emotions repetitiously are tortures for Catherine. She wants to be an angel to satisfy her husband, but she cannot stabilize her emotions by herself, which causes her death eventually.

5. Conclusion

In *Wuthering Heights*, feminine invalidism can pass from symbolic stepmothers to adolescent stepdaughters. Women inherit two attributes of feminine invalidism. Moreover, feminine invalidism not only refers to the physical and mental weakness of women in its traditional meaning, but also suggests a possibility to reverse the traditional gender roles in the family.

In the novel, "illness" is a strategy for women to defy the authorities in family, which subverts the stereotype of angel in the house. However, Isabella's refusal to eat and Catherine's delirium show that, although women can take advantage of the attributes of feminine invalidism to grab power from the patriarchal authority during periods of illness, they are overwhelmed by angelic weakness after recovery, and they return to the traditional roles defined by patriarchy. Therefore, the failure of a power grab from male authorities within families by "illness" is determined by the contradictory attributes of feminine invalidism and "illness" is not a successful strategy for women to promote gender equality within the family permanently.

Works Cited

- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*. The Feminist Press, 2011.
- Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Veritas paperback ed., Yale UP, 2020.