Fact Over Fable: An Education in Sontag's Doctrine - The Ethical Precision of Susan Sontag in *Illness as a Metaphor*

When reading too much fiction, one can understand how laborious and dull it gets to entertain yourself with fiction all the time—the overflowing elation suddenly turns into a mad rage and a need for something overtly intellectual, with a fine line that feels almost calculated, precise like a math formula that can drive your inert, bamboozled mind into some kind of thirst. Your sore brain feels droughted and you yearn for something that will straighten it out. Here comes critical theory, and who else should we be afraid of, once we discuss it, if not the mythologized creature of the critical tradition, **Susan Sontag**. In a rare coincidence of the act of smoking while writing this about Ms. Sontag, I have to mention that I am leading up to introduce one of her most interesting and personal works, **Illness as a Metaphor**, which she conceived whilst being treated for breast cancer. While she initially makes no mention of this, we have a fine line that distinguishes a person who merely theorizes on the impact of a terminal illness and is therefore reckoned very fortunate from a person who might start contemplating on such matters based on the circumstances presented to them. In this case, we encounter Sontag as a guardian of the ill who are very often romanticized or stigmatized because of their condition. We have to render these people ordinary if we think about their uneventful lives, as not all of us who are still enjoying good health can say that our lives could have been made more interesting by a twist of worsening health or fatality brought by something that we could have possibly predicted, as they are often foretold in fumes of our burning nicotine wrapped in a thin paper. However, we must all agree that our tendencies do not make us villainous in such terms that we are hurting ourselves just because we can. Sheer inability of a person to discern the reasons behind something might be a cause for them to feel threatened or even feel a bit of distaste. When avoiding something we do not comprehend, we obviously turn our backs to it. Although, we have to aim to achieve correctness along the way—that is what Susan Sontag is insisting upon—for us to be ethically and factually in line with what we are protesting against or rooting for.

Not to undertake dissecting Sontag's every complex thought, I would just be glad to mention that the antagonizing imagery of the two primary metaphors presented in this tremendous work, once criticized to be strident and unconvincing, offers wonderful depictions of the two most famous diseases that tormented the human race—one of them that was directly at arms with this brilliant mind itself. **Tuberculosis** and **Cancer** are two major illnesses that have never been just illnesses, as they stand out in all others to be the most interlinked to our natures by the connotations we attributed to them or their culprits. The first is a **romanticized plague** of our civilization standing at a pinnacle that is wholly and completely devoid of any traits that we can actually find in the disease itself; the other is the undefeated and rendered uncurable, but most importantly thought to be a sort of **punishment** that goes along with people who have made choices that are not fit for those who are not ill-made or vicious. Sontag herself and members of my family have

suffered cancer; the former also being connected to tuberculosis. Even if these illnesses have nothing in common, they are as intertwined as they are apart from each other—two very different illnesses, each of them being very destructive to our bodies and spirit, but at the same time different in their meanings to our outlook on the world and the people who have suffered by them. We must realize that these illnesses have served as an allusion to human philosophy that always goes beyond to what is presented, to what is factually given, and not always in a positive light.

Once finished, **Illness as a Metaphor** feels like a book of confession, written on behalf of people who never realized their mistake and by their ignorance uplifted a terrible disease or degraded people who have suffered by another. Sontag so masterfully entangles the discourse in her later work, **Aids as a Metaphor**, where AIDS is the same interlocutor in our monologue to humanity as cancer, often leading to the argument that we have to exterminate those that are unknown to us. The moral panic around AIDS demanded Sontag's intervention, as the crisis proved that humanity had learned nothing from the linguistic sins committed against tuberculosis and cancer. At last we are faced with the simple truths: firstly, that tuberculosis is not a sensitive, romantic disease or an artistic temperament that can cause people to be elevated to their ordinary selves. Secondly, cancer is not a sheer result of our will and the moral failure, as our health state is rarely and almost never dependent on our outlook on the world and our repressed emotions, completely shifting the blame from something natural compared to something that can be artificially incurred by our debauches. And lastly, as Blanche Devereaux once so brilliantly put it, AIDS is not God punishing people for their sins, as it is not a bad people's disease, and we all have to realize that before claiming to be educated—or even before claiming a point far from erudition as a point of relevance—to be considered good people.

As far as I am concerned, before reading **Illness as a Metaphor**, I have never realized how absorbed I was in the propaganda of the same malignant ideology that Sontag is so tirelessly fighting against. However, unless we are directly confronted by the disease, we cannot realize how deep it has gotten into our mindset, where relinquishing the metaphor seems almost impossible. No matter how vague that sounds, I have to get around the theme to really make anybody understand how fresh these ideas are to a person who does not have medical knowledge, nor the readiness to disentangle fact from the truth as a result of an ignorance that we all have, if in fact, we have never gathered strength to oppose something that makes little to no sense—possibly because of our inexperience, or deep-rooted stereotypes that still live on more than 45 years after the text was composed. Sontag is a warrior that fights against the persistence of these terrible ideologies, but however resilient this fight might be, we all have to realize that our minds work in very mysterious ways, and our language, our whole system of political and societal framework, acts in an emulated manner, bringing us to an exuberant example of our rottenness. Have you ever referred to a societal problem as a **"cancer"** that needs to be "cut out"? Have you ever called intense passion **"consuming"**? Then consider yourself to be part of the problem. The solution is always an enlightenment—something that was given to me or

revealed to me a bit better by Ms. Sontag, who by showing the insidious nature of the propaganda, revealed something that was concealed to me all along: metaphors are not always connected to artistry, especially when they refer to something completely unrelated to them and bring them out as demoralizing and vile. **The true causality of metaphor, then, is not the language itself, but the possibility of authentic, unmediated solidarity with the suffering.** Sontag aids the reader in discovering how our political philosophy, starting from medieval tractates until the romantic era and 20th century literature, has represented illness and the human body as somewhat close to either the state or the theme of the epoch, like sentimentality or obsession with death. We have to break through these stigmas that have long poisoned our minds. We must acknowledge that the rhetorical abuses she details are simply amplified in the political sphere. This language immediately shifts the subject from a complex human problem requiring debate and compromise to an aggressive, amoral threat requiring brutal, surgical elimination, or it is something that can be excused simply at the prospect of it being considered an asset to somebody's artistic persona, and falsely so. This tendency to frame political disagreement as a terminal disease is the same propaganda Sontag tirelessly fights—it simplifies moral failure, breeds hatred, and substitutes critical thought with immediate, destructive impulse. On the other hand, we must never think of ourselves bold enough to indulge in unrequited love for an illness that does not share the same attitude towards humanity. Indeed, one of the most deadly diseases, Tuberculosis, has been presented as a lofty ideal that made so many respectable people into somewhat better versions of themselves, which is a euphemistic cause at birth destined to be destroyed by the same notions that degrades and derails people who had the misfortune of "catching" something wholly inverted such as cancer. Instead of their romantic soul thriving, they received a lessened aptitude and a weak will. In fact, our fates are not connected to our licentiousness or our failure to express ourselves. It is not the vicissitude of fortune to be met with the illness, but rather something that just happens. No notions should be connected to illnesses, as they can only present themselves as they are: as diseases that are just as terrible and do not need to be worsened by our metaphysical ideas.

Sontag teaches us not to blindly trust the ideologies handed down to us, but rather to question the means behind our hatred or even sympathy towards things. Is it really the person that feels frightful if they have a disease, or are we simply detesting them because we do not understand that the causality of these illnesses is very loosely connected to their hosts, if not completely unrelated? This critical theory piece makes us absolutely inclined **never to trade an intellectually reassured, critical thought for a simple moral judgment**, a substitution that leads us to solidarity and a sanctuary at the edge of a more welcoming social contract, which obliges people to thoroughly engage with their mindsets before they inhabit them. We have to realize that intellectual, factual, and **ethical precision is significant**, and the violation of this can lead to a direct attack on humanity, since we can all experience these illnesses ourselves—simply judging a cancer patient, unbeknownst of the cancer inside of you, is such a natural thing to occur in our modern world, since the distribution is purely arbitrary, not set according to a moral flaw or higher artistic inclinations. The enlightenment gained from **Illness as a Metaphor** is the

difficult recognition that we were all, at some level, complicit in this linguistic rot. Sontag's text is not merely a historical study or a critical theory; it is a vital tool for stripping away the easy, seductive lies embedded in our language and ideologies we received from our forefathers and pass down on our children. To be truly educated, to achieve that **precise, calculated clarity** we initially sought, requires the relentless discipline of **separating fact from metaphor**, ensuring that the terrible reality of human suffering is never again worsened by our own afflictive ideas that in most cases turn out to be blatantly untrue or invented.