Journal of Asthma

ISSN: 0277-0903 (Print) 1532-4303 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ijas20

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**To cite this article:** Domenico Ribatti, Francesco M. Galassi, Elena Varotto & Mauro Vaccarezza (12 Sep 2025): The breath of revolution: Illness and metaphor in the life of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Journal of Asthma, DOI: 10.1080/02770903.2025.2555309

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/02770903.2025.2555309



Published online: 12 Sep 2025.

JOURNAL OF ASTHMA
https://doi.org/10.1080/02770903.2025.2555309



# The breath of revolution: Illness and metaphor in the life of Ernesto "Che" Guevara

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the chronic asthma of Ernesto "Che" Guevara not merely as a biomedical condition, but as a metaphorical and existential element of his revolutionary identity. Drawing on Aristotle's theory of metaphor and S. Sontag's cultural critique of illness, it explores how Guevara's lifelong struggle with asthma shaped his medical vocation and informed his political radicalism. Through a close reading of primary sources—including Guevara's letters, diaries, and biographical accounts—this study contextualizes his disease as both a personal crucible and a symbol of rebellion. The article situates Guevara within a lineage of physician-activists, alongside Albert Schweitzer and Frantz Fanon, to consider the transformative potential of embodied suffering in revolutionary praxis.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 4 May 2025
Revised 10 August 2025
Accepted 28 August 2025

**KEYWORDS**
Ernesto "Che" Guevara; asthma; metaphor; illness; revolutionary medicine; suffering; political anthropology

The Italian *Garzanti Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1) defines metaphor, following the Aristotelian tradition, as "the transfer of the name of one thing to another thing." This seemingly simple operation, as Aristotle elaborates in his *Rhetoric*, is not confined to the realm of poetry or artistic expression, but is a fundamental cognitive and rhetorical mechanism underpinning ordinary language and thought. For Aristotle, metaphor is not merely decorative—it is epistemological. It allows speakers and listeners alike to grasp the unknown through the known, the abstract through the concrete, and the complex through the familiar. The metaphor's power, therefore, lies in its capacity to establish illuminating correspondences between disparate domains, creating what Aristotle describes as "learning with delight" (2). This conceptual lineage finds a powerful modern continuation in Susan Sontag's seminal work *Illness as Metaphor* (3), where she critiques the figurative frameworks imposed upon disease, particularly tuberculosis and cancer, by the cultural imagination. Sontag writes: "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. All those who are born hold dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick." With this formulation, she reframes illness as not only a biological event but also a symbolic and narrative structure that reveals social fears, prejudices, and mythologies. In this sense, metaphors are not innocuous—they structure our experience of the body, identity, and mortality. In the spirit of both Aristotle's cognitive metaphor theory and Sontag's cultural critique, we propose to reread the chronic asthma of Ernesto "Che" Guevara not merely as a biomedical diagnosis, but as a living metaphor that shaped his identity, ethics, and political commitment. His asthma, persistent and often debilitating from early childhood, functioned not only as a somatic constraint but also as a source of intellectual and moral formation. Given the expertise of this journal's readership, the clinical definition of asthma is well known; however, for clarity, we briefly define it here as a chronic inflammatory disorder of the airways characterized by variable and recurring symptoms, airflow obstruction, bronchial hyperresponsiveness, and underlying inflammation. It affects individuals of all ages and is one of the most common chronic diseases globally. Asthma involves inflammation of the bronchial tubes, leading to swelling and narrowing of the airways. This results in symptoms such as: wheezing (a high-pitched whistling sound during breathing), shortness of breath, chest tightness, and coughing, especially

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at night or early morning. The inflammation causes increased mucus production and hyperresponsiveness of the airways to various stimuli, including allergens, exercise, cold air, and respiratory infections (4–6). In our specific context, asthma configured the way Guevara experienced the world, empathized with the suffering of others, and conceived of medicine as both a personal vocation and a social act of liberation. It is beyond the scope of this work to examine in detail the historical and political aspects of Che Guevara's life. Our focus is, rather, on analyzing the impact of asthma on such a prominent historical figure, particularly in light of his unique threefold identity as a revolutionary leader, a physician, and a patient (7,8). Indeed, after earning his degree in medicine from the University of Buenos Aires in 1953, Guevara chose to write his thesis on allergic diseases—a choice clearly motivated by his own very intimate battle with asthma (9). His medical education was not simply academic; it was embodied, experiential, and deeply felt. The turning point came when he met Dr. Salvador Pisani, a pioneering figure in Argentine allergology. Pisani, through an innovative desensitization therapy based on semi-digested antigens, brought Guevara substantial relief from his most acute symptoms. But the therapeutic relationship evolved rapidly into a scientific collaboration. Pisani, recognizing Guevara's intellectual rigor and curiosity, invited him to join his laboratory as an assistant, initiating him into the practical and experimental dimensions of immunological research. In this context, Guevara did not merely study medicine—he practiced it, lived it, and began to envision its potential as a tool for social justice (9,10).

Furthermore, an interesting and noteworthy aspect of Che Guevara's medical biography in relation to the asthma he suffered from is the fact that he was a smoker, first of asthmatic cigarettes, and then of Havana cigars. It seems, in fact, that smoking exerted a "positive" effect on him, probably easing the tension that animated him and consigning him to history in the iconic pose with the cigar between his lips, although it is realistic to observe that this did not contribute to, indeed aggravated, his asthmatic condition, since it is known as cigar smoking can trigger or worsen asthma symptoms (11,12).

Thus, Guevara's asthma—echoing Sontag's metaphor of dual citizenship in the realms of health and illness—can be interpreted not merely as a limiting affliction, but as a paradoxical source of liberation. On the one hand, it imposed a constant awareness of mortality, vulnerability, and physical constraint. On the other, it became a lens through which Guevara developed a profound sensitivity to the suffering of others. This duality provided the experiential foundation for his deep-seated empathy, sharpened his critique of systemic inequality, and intensified his existential urgency. It is no coincidence that much of Guevara's writing and testimony reveals a remarkable awareness of the body—its fragility, its pain, but also its potential as an instrument of resistance and transformation. In the intimate struggle to breathe—a daily negotiation with asphyxia—Guevara discovered not only physical pain but also moral clarity. Breathing, for him, was not simply a biological act but a battle against limits, a metaphor for human dignity under siege. In medicine, he sought not merely a career but a redemptive function: a means to abolish suffering not only in himself but in the world. Medicine thus emerged as both vocation and crucible, where science and ideology could be fused in the service of humanity. Yet, at the threshold of a promising medical career—perhaps as one of Latin America's foremost allergists—Guevara made a radical turn. He chose exile over establishment, motion over security. His departure was not merely a geographical dislocation but an ideological rupture, a voluntary embrace of statelessness and solidarity with the oppressed. His asthma, which his father described as "violently acute" and which physicians considered among the severest they had encountered in a child (9), did not deter him. Rather, it forged in him a form of ascetic endurance.

His farewell letter to his parents, dated April 1, 1965, testifies to this inner resolve: "It could be that this is the last. I don't look for it, but it's in the logical calculation of probabilities. If so, I send you a last hug. I loved you very much, only I didn't know how to express my affection; I am extremely drastic in my actions, and I think that sometimes you didn't understand. It wasn't easy to understand me, on the other hand. Just believe me today. Now, a will that I polished with the love of an artist will support two weak legs and two tired lungs. It will. Remember from time to time this little leader of the twentieth century. A kiss to Clelia, to Roberto, Juan Martin and Patolin, to Beatriz, to everyone. To you a big hug of a prodigal and rebellious son. Ernesto" (13). This is not simply poetic rhetoric; it is a philosophical creed. Guevara's strength resided not in his body, but in his disciplined transcendence of its limitations. Such instances of physiological hardship and existential defiance recur throughout his writings. On July 14, 1967, his thirty-ninth and final birthday (Figure 1), with Bolivian forces closing in on his guerrilla camp, Guevara noted in his diary: "A day of anguish, hours of tension, the soldiers are very close, I am turning 39 and growing old, the water of the stream has a bitter taste, I am tormented by asthma and a fierce hunger" (13). Even in this moment of acute physical

**Figure 1.** Photograph showing Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, shortly before his capture and execution. Image in the public domain from Wikimedia Commons. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Che_Guevara#/media/File:CheinBolivia1.jpg.

and psychological distress, asthma is not framed as mere pathology—it is interwoven with aging, hunger, and existential solitude. It becomes a cipher of his human condition and the inescapable embodiment of his revolutionary burden. Viewed through this prism, asthma ceases to be a clinical descriptor and becomes a metaphor of oppression: The tightening chest mimics the constrictions imposed by imperialism, poverty, and alienation. But it is also a metaphor of defiance: a struggle to breathe is also a refusal to submit. In Guevara's case, the chronic respiratory crisis was sublimated into political militancy in the same way that Marcel Proust (1871–1922)—another famed asthmatic (14)—sublimated his condition into literary brilliance. If Proust turned inward, sculpting memory and time from within a cork-lined room, Guevara turned outward, seeking to reshape history through guerrilla war. For both, illness became a metaphorical forge, a space where necessity was transmuted into vision and suffering into creativity. Indeed, Guevara's alignment with figures such as Albert Schweitzer and Frantz Fanon—both physician-intellectuals and committed humanists—further underscores the archetype of the "doctor-citizen." These were men for whom the healing of the body could not be separated from the healing of society. As Kellner (15) and Luther and Henken (16) observe, Guevara's early clinical experiences in leprosaria across South America and his involvement in community health projects in Guatemala laid the groundwork for his later public health reforms in revolutionary Cuba and his commitment to anti-colonial struggle in Africa and Latin America. His medical ethos became a political ethic.

Ultimately, Guevara's life urges us to reconsider how personal suffering—especially chronic, embodied suffering—can be a well-spring of ethical consciousness and political commitment. His lungs may have been structurally weak, but his metaphorical respiration—the breath of critique, the breath of solidarity, the breath of rebellion—was irrepressible. He did not merely endure illness; he transfigured it, converting each breath wrested from constriction into a gesture of historical defiance.

## Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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