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Review paper

PRESENTATION OF PANDEMICS IN LITERATURE

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Abstract: Covid-19, like other outbreaks of infectious diseases, has reawakened our interest in pandemic literature. While ordinary people, in their feeling of fear and uncertainty, tend to look back at such books, hoping they will discover what to expect, learn how to behave, and find some hope and solace in the fact that people do manage to overcome such experiences and that all pandemics eventually end, literary critics dig deep into these stories, looking for similarities and differences, studying the ways pandemics are depicted, and exploring specific narrative techniques, language, style and motifs. On the other hand, the interest also rises among authors, who, inspired by the newest pandemic, decide to write books with similar topics, mostly with the purpose of warning people that they have to change something in their behaviour and everyday practices in order to avoid the repetition of similar diseases.

The purpose of this paper is first to explore the role of literature during a pandemic. Second, the paper will give a review of various topics and genres connected with pandemic literature. Finally, the paper will attempt to examine the parallels between pandemic literature and real pandemics, especially Covid-19.

Keywords: *pandemic literature, plague, flu, virus, uncertainty, fear, conspiracy theories*.

1. Introduction: why do we read and write about pandemics?

Literature has always reflected significant events from the real world. This is particularly true in relation to pandemic diseases, which leave in their wake some of the most frightening and painful experiences of human life. At the same time, people seem to be drawn to such gruesome topics, which can be proven by the fact

that the sales of pandemic books rise with the appearance of every new disease.[1] One of the explanations for this strange preference could be that in such difficult times people are terrified, confused, frustrated and depressed. Consequently, they need information, comfort and distraction, and expect to find them in pandemic books. On the other hand, authors of such works have their own mission – by writing about lethal diseases they want to raise awareness, educate, warn, and provide comfort and entertainment.

A very good example of this is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Considered "the single most illuminating work of literature ever written on contagion and human behavior" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 4), it gives a remarkable account of the Great Plague of London, which took place in 1665. The reason why Defoe wrote this novel fifty-seven years after the lethal pandemic is that at the time of its publication people feared that a new plague, which came to Marseilles from the Middle East, might cross into England. Therefore, he created this book as a warning to his readers, and his main intention was to give advice: "It is a kind of practical handbook of what to do and . . . what to avoid during a deadly outbreak" (Wolny, 2018, p. 150).

The importance of literature is also stressed in Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man*, which is considered "the first major novel to imagine the extinction of the human race by way of a global pandemic" (Lepore, 2020, para. 9). The last surviving man, Lionel Verney, wanders the ruined streets of Rome and enters the home of an author. There he finds a manuscript of a study on the Italian language and, looking at its unfinished dedication to posterity, he decides to write a book called *The History of the Last Man*. Although there is no one left to read it, Verney still believes that it is important to write it in honour of the illustrious dead, who might arise in the form of shadows and read the history of their fall. Furthermore, he thinks that there is still a chance that this world will be re-populated one day, so his book might serve as a record of things (Shelley, 1996, p. 364).

Literature as a post-apocalyptic evidence of human existence is also one of the topics of Saramago's *Blindness* (1995). In this novel, the disease that affects people is blindness, and the only person who is left with sight, the doctor's wife, decides to read to the blind the story of humankind. Finally, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353) reveals a more entertaining role of pandemic literature. It shows ten people who self-isolate in a villa outside Florence during the Black Death and fight the monotony of the quarantine by telling each other stories. At the same time, their storytelling can be interpreted both as a means of escape and an attempt to reinstate normalcy.

[1] In an article in *The Guardian*, Theroux (2020), referring to his recent experience at a Waterstones bookshop, reveals that he managed to purchase Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, "[b]ut Camus's *The Plague* had gone the way of dried pasta and toilet roll; there was just a desolate gap on the shelves where the copies had once been" (para. 1).

2. Pandemic literature: types and genres

Although we tend to use the general term "pandemic literature" or even "plague literature", the books that fall into this category differ in many ways. First, they focus on various diseases, the most common being plague, cholera and influenza. Second, some of these books are accounts of real pandemics and some are even written from authors' personal experience. For example, Katherine Anne Porter and D. H. Lawrence almost died of the 1918 flu;[2] W. B. Yeats nursed his pregnant wife through this illness; Thomas Wolfe's brother died from it; and T. S. Eliot thought that his brain was damaged by it (Outka, 2020, p. 1). Third, plenty of these books feature fictional characters through whose experience we get to know what it was like to cope with such diseases. Still, most of these authors use their knowledge of real epidemics to create their fictional ones.

While a few of these novels are set in the past, most modern pandemic books deal with future societies, man-made or bioengineered viruses, and fit the science fiction or dystopian genre. For instance, Jack London's 1912 novel *The Scarlet Plague* takes place in 2073, sixty years after the outbreak of the Red Death, a pandemic which almost devastated the world in 2013. Furthermore, in Michael Crichton's 1969 techno-thriller *The Andromeda Strain*, a group of scientists explores the appearance of a fatal extraterrestrial microorganism in Arizona. Similarly, Stephen King's post-apocalyptic fantasy *The Stand* focuses on "a bioengineered superflu named 'Project Blue' [which] leaks out of an American military base" (Haith, 2020, Modern and Contemporary Literature section, para. 2), and Deon Meyer's 2016 novel *Fever* takes place in South Africa, after a "weaponised, bioengineered virus" (para. 3) wipes out 95 percent of the world's population.

Several of these books are allegories, whose authors use the metaphorical nature of this genre to explore the most problematic issues of contemporary society such as colonialism, consumerism, pollution, globalisation, overpopulation, etc. For example, Shelley's *The Last Man* can be interpreted as her apocalyptic response to the most important social and historical issues of her age such as "the horrors of the French Revolution, the subsequent carnage of the Napoleonic wars, and the metaphysical and cultural uncertainties attendant upon Romantic-era attacks on religious and political authority" (Lokke, 2003, p. 116). In Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), "through the personification of the plague, represented by a mysterious figure disguised as a Red Death victim, the author meditates on the inevitability of death" (Riva, Benedetti, & Cesana, 2014, p. 1753). Camus's *The Plague*, which is set in Oran, Algeria, in the unspecified year of 194–, is often seen as "an allegory of the German occupation of France" (Thody, 1989, p. 50). Furthermore, "the novel also dramatises the victory of human spirit and solidarity over that which would threaten and dismember it: a plague, an enemy occupation, existence itself" (Gray, 2017, p. 165).

[2] The 1918 pandemic influenza, caused by an H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin, which is believed to have infected a third of world's population and killed 50-100 million people, is the deadliest event in modern history (Morens & Taubenberger, 2018, pp. 1449–1450).

On the other hand, London uses his novel *The Scarlet Plague* to criticise capitalism since it "led to the rise in population and to overcrowding, and overcrowding led to plague. Consequently, capitalism is presented as the ultimate cause of the pandemic" (Riva et al., 2014, p. 1755). Similarly, Ling Ma's *Severance* (2008), in which "the fictional 'Shen Fever' renders people repetitive automatons until their deaths", can be interpreted as "a thinly veiled metaphor for the capitalist cog-in-the-machine" (Haith, 2020, Modern and Contemporary Literature section, para. 4). In addition, Saramago's *Blindness* "indicts the twentieth-century authoritarian state: the institutionalization of the vulnerable [and] the ruthlessness of military rulers" (Lepore, 2020, para. 24), and the titular disease actually symbolises "the human condition" (para. 25). Finally, in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991), the plague is meant to represent AIDS, which is referred to as the "gay plague" (Reilly, 2015, p. 134).

3. Topics in pandemic literature

Pandemic literature covers a multitude of topics[3] which can be divided into several categories. First, many of these novels talk about the way the authorities deal with a pandemic. In the beginning, they usually deny its existence and hesitate to act, which means that they are often late in their response: "Much of the literature of plague and infectious diseases presents the carelessness, incompetence and selfishness of those in power as the sole instigator of the fury of the masses" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 6). As an example Pamuk refers to Alessandro Manzoni's 1827 novel *The Betrothed*, in which the governor of Milan disregards the threat of the plague and refuses to cancel a local prince's birthday celebration (para. 5). In addition, the authorities often manipulate the information about the disease – they forbid the spreading of information through censorship or distort the facts and either lower or increase the number of casualties. For instance, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe explains that in 1664, when the plague first appeared, local authorities in some parts of London deliberately reduced the number of plague deaths by attributing them to other invented diseases:

> [I]n the months of July and August, when the plague was coming on to its highest pitch, it was very ordinary to have from a thousand to twelve hundred, nay, to almost fifteen hundred a week of other distempers. Not that the numbers of those distempers were really increased to such a degree, but the great number of families and houses where really the infection was, obtained the favour to have their dead be returned of other distempers, to prevent the shutting up their houses. (Defoe, 200, pp.154–155)

[3] While most pandemic novels make the disease their main topic, some others use it only as a setting. Among these are Homer's *Iliad*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), and some of iconic modernist works such as W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), in which the flu seems to have only a spectral presence (Outka, 2020, p. 99).

Furthermore, these novels frequently describe the measures that the government eventually introduces in order to protect the spreading of the disease. Defoe (2001) writes exhaustively about the "orders conceived and published by the Lord Mayor and Alderman of the city of London concerning the infection of the Plague" (p. 29). Some of them refer to the appointment of officials responsible for examining, observing, searching for and nursing the affected (pp. 29–30), while others prescribe what to do with "infected houses and persons sick of the plague" such as: the master of the infected house should inform the appointed examiner of the disease; the sick should be "sequestered"; "their bedding and apparel and hangings of chambers must be well aired" (p. 31); the infected or visited houses should be shut up, marked and watched; not a single person or thing should be "conveyed out of any infected house" (p. 33); and those who died of the plague ought to be buried "either before sun-rising or after sun-setting" and only be accompanied by church wardens or a constable (p. 32).

There are also the orders regulating "cleansing and keeping of the streets sweet" (p. 34), which include rules on how to handle unwholesome fish or flesh, musty corn, musty and unwholesome casks at the brewers and tippling-houses, and animals such as hogs, dogs, cats, tame pigeons or conies (p. 35). In addition, the city officials impose the orders "concerning loose persons and idle assemblies", which stipulate that beggars should be removed from the streets, that all forms of entertainment such as "plays, bear-baitings, games, singing of ballads, buckler-play" should be "utterly prohibited", that all public feasting should "be foreborne till further order and allowance" (p. 35), and that "disorderly tippling in taverns, ale-houses, coffee-houses, and cellars be severely looked into, as the common sin of this time and greatest occasion of dispersing the plague" (p. 36).[4]

Still, pandemic fiction is more focused on the behaviour of ordinary people, which is mainly caused by fear and uncertainty. Theroux (2020) believes that the primary lesson of plague literature is that human response to such crises is very predictable: "Over millennia, there has been a consistent pattern to behaviour during pandemics: the hoarding, the panicking, the fear, the blaming, the superstition, the selfishness, the surprising heroism, the fixation with the numbers of the reported dead, the boredom during quarantine" (para. 2). Almost all pandemic novels cover most of these topics. For example, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Londoners accumulate provisions and shut themselves up: "[M]any families, foreseeing the approach of the distemper, laid up stores of provisions sufficient for their whole families, and shut themselves up, and that so entirely that they were neither seen or heard of till the infection was quite ceased" (Defoe, 2001, p. 42). Furthermore, both Defoe and Manzoni write about people meeting in the streets and asking each other for news about the plague as well as creating rumours and spreading false information (Pamuk, 2020, para. 9). For instance, Defoe (2001) describes a situation in which people rumoured that meat at some shambles was contagious:

[4] Some of these measures are very similar to those we have today such as: isolation or quarantine, distancing, closing institutions such as factories, theatres and schools, banning public gatherings and curfew.

> It was in those shambles that two persons falling down dead, as they were buying meat, gave rise to a rumour that the meat was all infected; which, though it might affright the people, and spoiled the market for two or three days, yet it appeared plainly afterwards that there was nothing of truth in the suggestion. (pp. 181–182).

4. Pandemics: who is to blame?

During pandemics people live in the constant state of terror, panic, anxiety, doubt and uncertainty. They cannot obtain proper and honest answers to most of their questions and are afraid that they might get infected or infect somebody else. At the same time, since pandemics are caused by viruses or the so-called invisible enemy, people feel the need to find other, more plausible causes, and to blame the disease on more "visible" enemies. Unsurprisingly, this leads to superstition, conspiracy theories, scapegoating, witch-hunting, racism and xenophobia.

4.1. Supernatural causes and conspiracy theories

In the past times, people's fear of pandemics was intensified by their belief in the supernatural origin of such diseases. Even in the Bible, the plague was seen as God's punishment for sins, "so the frightening description of its spread was interpreted as a warning to the Israelites to behave morally" (Riva et al., 2014, p. 1753).[5] Similarly, *A Journal of the Plague Year* reveals "an anger against fate, against a divine will that witnesses and perhaps even condones all this death and human suffering, and a rage against the institutions of organized religion that seem unsure how to deal with any of it" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 7). Besides God, people in Defoe's novel desperately seek other culprits for the outbreak of the plague, so they blame it on the strange phenomena in the sky:

> In the first place, a blazing star or comet[6] appeared for several months before the plague, as there did the year after another, a little before the fire. The old women and the phlegmatic hypochondriac part of the other sex . . . remarked . . . that those two comets passed directly over the city, and that so very near the houses that it was plain they imported something peculiar to the city alone. (Defoe, 2001, p. 15).

In addition, the 1889–1890 flu, also known as the Russian flu, which is considered the first modern influenza pandemic, was attributed respectively to electric light, telegraph poles, and even to stardust, volcanic dust, and bird migrations (Knapp, 2020, para. 3, 12, 13).

However, a more dangerous product of pandemics are conspiracy theories. They are likewise triggered by anxiety and doubt connected with our fear of

[5] This connection between plague and sin can be traced back to Greek literary texts, such as Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, but it can also be found in postmodern novels such as *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), in which the Great Plague of London is perceived as "God's judgement on the murder of the King" (Winterson, 2001, p. 138).

[6] According to Reilly (2015), the influence of stars, comets and planets is also connected with our belief in God's judgement and destiny (p. 5).

strange things and foreign people, whom we usually blame for causing, bringing or spreading diseases. For example, during the 1918 flu, Americans invented different conspiracy theories, almost all of them pointing fingers at Germany: "Letters poured into government investigators, speculating that everything from cigarettes, food, Bayer aspirin tablets, and strangers with hypodermic needles might be spreading the disease for the enemy"; but the most common accusation was "that [the flu] originated with spies recently brought ashore by German submarines" (Givens, 2020, para. 8).[7]

Furthermore, it is often thought that modern viruses are produced in labs by order of governments, rich companies or pharmaceutical industry, which can be seen in the aforementioned novels such as King's *The Stand* or Meyer's *Fever*. In regard to Covid-19, it is rumoured that "political and scientific elites and institutional bodies – among them Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, CDC director Robert Redfield, the FDA, and the WHO – created the virus in coordination with a Wuhan laboratory, hoping to infect the world and reap enormous profits from a mandatory vaccine" (Givens, 2020, para. 4). Moreover, Covid-19 is seen as "China's economic retort to the United States and the rest of the world" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 11). Besides, it seems that pandemics are used by the rich as a weapon against the poor. First, "wealthy nations have signed advanced contracts that give them the right to purchase the first vaccines and medicines during an influenza epidemic" (Smallman, 2015, p. 16); and second, wealthy countries hoard and stockpile drugs, which, in most cases, are "underutilized . . . and returned" (p. 17). This prevents poor countries from obtaining vaccines on time.

4. 2. Blaming "the other" and ourselves

Still, pandemics are more often attributed to the groups of people, usually foreigners, whom we consider a potential threat or enemies, which reveals our xenophobia and racial and religious discrimination. One of the earliest examples of this practice can be found in the fact that Thucydides began his account of the plague that ravaged fifth-century Athens "by noting that the outbreak had started far away, in Ethiopia and Egypt" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 12).[8] Similarly, the Black Death (1347–1351), which killed anywhere from one-tenth to one-half of Europe's population, was conveniently believed to have eastern origins. Apparently, it arrived abroad Genoese galleys that sailed from the Black Sea in the summer of 1347 and docked at Messina in Sicily. Then it spread to the rest of the island, onward to Sardinia and Corsica, and then to mainland Italy (Snowden, 2019, p. 36). As a result of this belief, some of the authors of pandemic literature

[7] Speaking of Covid-19, some people believe that it "was actually caused by the introduction of 5G broadband, and radiation from cell towers equipped with the technology" (Knapp, 2020, para. 1).

[8] The fact that Egypt was considered the source of this and other plagues can be connected with a biblical story about God's chosen people, the Israelites, who lived in bondage in Egypt. The story says that through Moses and Aaron, God ordered Pharaoh to free his people but Pharaoh refused. In response, God sent a series of terrible plagues upon the Egyptians, so "[p]lagues, in other words, were divine punishment for defying the will of God" (Snowden, 2019, p. 11).

also chose the East as the source of their pandemics, e.g., the plague in Shelley's *The Last Man* starts in Constantinople and spreads to Athens, the two cities which were actually hit by the plague.

Another example of our prejudice and hatred to other nations during pandemics can be traced back to the Roman Empire, when Marcus Aurelius launched persecutions against Christians, blaming them for the outbreak of Antonine smallpox plague: "Christians . . . refused to pay homage to the Roman gods which, the emperor believed, in turn angered the gods whose wrath made itself known in the form of a devastating epidemic" (Horgan, 2019, para. 8). Later on, Jews seem to have been regular victims of scapegoating and witch-hunting since "during subsequent plagues [they] were accused of poisoning the wells both in the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe" (Pamuk, 2020, para. 14). Such incident[9] occurred at Strasbourg in Alsace, on Valentine's Day 1349. The municipal authorities held the two thousand Jews living in the city responsible for spreading pestilence by poisoning the wells from which Christian citizens drew their water. Consequently, they were offered two choices – conversion or death. Half of them renounced their religion and the remaining thousand were taken to the Jewish cemetery and burned alive. After this, the Christian authorities banned Jews from entering the city (Snowden, 2019, p. 64).

Furthermore, pandemics are repeatedly given names according to the country of their supposed origin, which can also be understood as hatred towards other nations. The 1889–1890 flu was called Russian or Asiatic because it was first reported in the Central Asian city of Bukhara in the Russian Empire.[10] Similarly, the 1918 flu was dubbed Spanish because it was believed at the time that it had come from Spain. The reason for this was the fact that "Spain, still a nonbelligerent, had no wartime censorship to keep its health problems secret from the world" (Crosby, 2003, p. 26). In addition, the 2009 flu began in southern Mexico so it became "the Mexican flu", "which Mexicans perceived to stigmatize their entire country . . . and fought hard to rename the virus" (Smallman, 2015, p. 4). Moreover, since it was implied, again incorrectly, that this flu was caused through the contact with pigs or pig products, it was also called the "Swine flu pandemic". This led to stigmatisation of the countries or nations who bred and ate pigs, e.g., in Egypt, "the Muslim majority argued that Coptic Christians were endangering the nation by breaking food taboos by eating pork, the consumption of which is forbidden within Islam" (Smallman, 2015, p. 4). When it comes to Covid-19, since it first appeared in Wuhan, China, it has been referred to by U. S. President Donald Trump as the "Chinese virus", the "Wuhan" virus or, even more offensive, the "kung flu". This practice is also reflected in the pandemic books of the American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937), who accuses

[9] Literary accounts of similar events can be found in Manzoni's epic plague novel *The Betrothed* (1827) as well as in his historical work *The Column of Infamy* (1843) (Snowden, 2019, p. 64).

[10] The cholera which strikes Venice in Mann's *Death in Venice* is also referred to as Asiatic (Reilly, 2015, p. 83).

immigrants and sexual deviants of contaminating pure Arian blood lines (Outka, 2020, p. 234).

Finally, typical reactions to a pandemic are also contagion guilt and survivor's guilt or envy. Contagion guilt, which implies that we are afraid of passing a deadly infection to other people, is present in William Maxwell's novel about the Spanish flu, *They Came Like Swallows* (1937), in which it "damages the family, breaking the sense that they can protect one another from harm and introducing the terrifying possibility that they caused the harm themselves" (Outka, 2020, p. 92). On the other hand, Outka finds both of these reactions in Porter's novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), where Miranda, who managed to survive, feels guilty because her boyfriend Adam, who probably had contracted the flu by caring for her, lost the battle against the malignant disease. She expresses her guilt by refusing consolation and reluctantly accepting her need to go on living (pp. 71–72).

5. Conclusion

Covid-19, like all other real and fictional pandemics, will eventually end. Humankind will survive one more time and, with a bit of luck, learn something from this dreadful experience, still hoping that they will never be thrown into a similar situation again. Of course, Covid-19, like all other real pandemics, will inspire new generations of authors to create their own stories of disease, suffering, fear and death on the one hand, and love, mercy, kindness and hope on the other. These new stories, hopefully, will only be a source of pleasure and entertainment. However, should a new epidemic emerge, they will once more teach people what to expect, what to do and how to behave during another modern-day plague. In the end, as this paper proves, writing and reading about various pandemics, real or fictional, is primarily meant to be a learning experience.

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