

Developing a Voice through Literature: An Analysis of Pandemic Writing

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Abstract- *Literature during a pandemic provides meaning to the reader by using storytelling to shape the way that we understand and experience illness, disease, and health. Narratives are an attempt to bring closure to what is meaningless. During the void that is found during a pandemic, literature is able to serve a purpose and make sense of plagues. Pandemic literature exists not only to be analyzed, but also to tell stories. It is used as a reminder that sense still exists somewhere within society. Literature gives readers an escape outside of quarantine through invented stories. It is a reclamation against what illness represents, that the world is not our own. Literature and writing are necessary in the aftermath of a pandemic. It is through literature and writing, which has the ability to teach readers about the effects of the deadly manifestations on humanity, and how they shape what it means to be human.*

Keywords- *Literature; Pandemic; Writing*

Literature is a powerful force for both the author and the reader during times of a pandemic. Authors have been shaped by real life experiences and their ability to create fictional stories. According to Cummings, “From the earliest days of recorded history, bacteria and viruses have stalked humans. Lurking in dirty corners and sewage-filled streets, stowing away on ships and airplanes, they waited for their chance to attack” (1). Literature has described pandemics of bacteria and viruses, such as the Spanish Influenza, that struck with a speed and ferocity around the world. By 1918, the influenza virus took hold of the people, killing approximately 50 to 100 million.

During some of the most difficult times, pandemics have effected literature in positive ways. Author Katherine Porter felt her life transform, as she used her personal experiences with Influenza, which she survived, to write a powerful novella entitled, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*.

Porter was close to death, yet felt that she had reached a paradise, one that would free her from the pain and fear that Porter was experiencing from the pandemic.

The story of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* was one of the few literary works written about the Influenza pandemic, a virus that killed more people in the United States than what the nation had lost combined in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries wars. Porter explained her experiences as being written as, simply dividing her life, and after she was in some strange altered, it took her a long time to go out and live in the world again.

The novel, *American Pandemic* by Nancy Bristow, describes a world similar to that of COVID-19, one that describes Influenza and its impact, as it turned the world upside down. By including true-life accounts of how patients, their families, and communities were confronted with the epidemic, readers develop a shared experience of stories during a pandemic. There is a value to sharing experiences of life experiences, such as those felt by

doctors, nurses, and the challenges of experiencing the Influenza virus by society. Bristow writes, “As I have tried to write the history of the people who lived and died in the pandemic I have felt a deep gratitude to the voices of the past that have made such work possible. This gratitude carries with it a tremendous sense of responsibility to do justice to the stories they have shared. I feel a similar sense of both gratitude and responsibility to the countless people and institutions whose support made this book possible” (3). It is through the account of life experience that authors are able to share stories of tragedy and hope to the reader.

“According to family lore, in the fall of 1918 John Bristow, an adolescent of 14 or 15, was orphaned in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother Elizabeth had died quickly and unexpectedly of Influenza. While attending funeral services a few days later, his father began feeling ill. Within days, John lost his only remaining parent. In the course of a week he had become both an orphan and an adult. Even the comforts of home were taken away, the family’s few possessions removed by relatives during the second funeral. With both parents gone, John went to work. Little more is known about this catastrophic event in young Bristow’s life, an event that was repeated millions of times during the fall and winter of 1918–1919 as the worst Influenza pandemic in recorded history raged around the world” (Bristow 3). In many ways, this thinking is quite similar to what society has felt with COVID-19, as it promises to alter us all in strange ways. However, experiencing such trauma positively effects literature and speaks to readers in a profound way, as seen in the following stories:

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (1353)

The granddaddy of pandemic fiction, *The Decameron* relates tales told by refugees from the Black Death in 14th century Florence.

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year (1722): The Plague Year*

A literary and historical account of the bubonic plague in 17th century London.

Katherine Anne Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" (1939)

A short story about the great flu pandemic of 1918-1919 by an author who survived it.

Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (1940)

Another novel about the 1918-1919 flu pandemic, in this case set in colonial India.

Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947)

A novel about the plague in French-ruled Algeria after World War II, often seen as a metaphor for everything from Nazism to colonialism and the existential crisis of the human spirit.

Kenzaburo Oe, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (1958)

The story of a group of reform school boys sent to a plague-stricken Japanese village during World War II.

Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain* (1961)

A classic science fiction novel about medical attempts to combat a pandemic.

Octavia E. Butler, *Survivor* (1978)

A novel about the survivors of a widespread plague on Earth who settle on another planet.

Gabriel García Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985)

A novel by the great Colombian writer that explores analogies of love, passion and disease.

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009)

The first two novels of the MaddAdam trilogy, they explore how women and men adjusted to a world torn apart by disaster.

Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (2010)

A novel about the impact of the 1944 polio epidemic on a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, N.J.

Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (2011)

A portrait of New York City as a post-apocalyptic dystopia infected by a plague that turns its inhabitants into zombies.

The Influenza pandemic came during one of the deadliest wars in the world. Unlike the COVID-19 Pandemic, Influenza received less attention. However, during the Influenza pandemic, literature rose, as it speaks to the current COVID-19 pandemic, as many have lost their lives. Despite the world being overrun by grief and death, it was the war that took away from much of the media attention. The rise in literature has profoundly affected the emotional side of readers. It is literature that brings the reader to explore morality, solidarity, and survival. Literature takes the reader beyond the statistics that measure global death, along with the degree to which pandemics have spread, in order to show how the crisis has affected individual lives. Instead, literature provides a landscape as to how the impact of pandemics have effected humanity.

Literature and Inspiration

Literature serves as inspiration as readers go through difficult days with family and friends, as a reminder that

even the hardest times can prompt and illustrate a triumph of the human spirit. Literature during a pandemic provides meaning to the reader by using storytelling to shape the way that we understand and experience illness, disease, and health. There has always been pandemic literature, since there have always been pandemics that have affected society. Plagues, pestilence, and pandemics within literature provides a sense of explanation, along with meaning in order to describe the panic, horror, and despair experienced. Narratives are an attempt to bring closure to what is meaningless. During the void that is found during a pandemic, literature is able to serve a purpose and make sense of plagues.

Pandemic literature exists not only to be analyzed, but also to tell stories. It is used as a reminder that sense still exists somewhere within society. Literature gives readers an escape outside of quarantine through invented stories. It is a reclamation against what illness represents, that the world is not our own. Literature is necessary in the aftermath of a pandemic. In Emily St. John Mandel's novel, *Station Eleven*, which took place several years after the "Georgian Flu" had taken the lives of the majority of humans, and when civilization had collapsed, Mandel's novel follows a group of Shakespearean actors, as they travel by caravan into the Great Lakes region, on the other side of the United States-Canadian border. *Station Eleven* became to some extent, a love letter to the reader that had been lost to a pandemic. The novel provided an explanation of how the crisis happened, and the reason for why they were so interconnected, as survivors tried to rebuild, it is the job of the author to try and supply meaning to that disease; for why the disease had taken so many away.

Writing Experiences When in Crisis

Pandemics have transformed life through the writings found in literature, in particular writing. It is the one way to look back and tell the story of life and how they lived through history. Through writing, authors have expressed their fears, hopes, and their joys; while helping to make sense of the world around them. It is the writings that are found during pandemics that readers find the best evidence of people and their inner worlds. There is power in writing during times crisis.

In January 1962, Barbara W. Tuchman wrote published *The Guns of August*, a military history of the antecedents and first month of World War I. The book gave an account of what led to European powers entering what would become a four-year conflict in the summer of 1914. Many believed that such fighting would have lasted only a few weeks, however, such a war created several years of national resentments and interlocking alliances of World War I that abruptly ended years of peace. Thirty nations had suffered a total of 20 million military and civilian deaths, plus 21 million more wounded. *The Guns of August* sold more than 260,000 copies in its first eight months, remained on the New York Times best seller list for nearly a year, and won Tuchman the first of her two Pulitzer Prizes, as the writings of World War I that led to

war brought meaning to readers. Writing provides readers to find a shared experience from crisis.

It was President John F. Kennedy had requested that each of his aides read it, distributed copies to U.S. military bases throughout the world, and reportedly gave copies as gifts to foreign dignitaries who visited the White House. In a world consumed by Cold War tensions, the president was particularly struck by Tuchman and her account of the late 1914 conversation between the former German chancellor and his successor about the blunders that sparked the outbreak of total war. Rather than ordering a bombing against Cuba, it was the writings of *The Guns of August* that led President Kennedy toward restraint that enabled peace to prevail.

Writing during crisis gives meaning of events to the intended audience, the author can tailor style, tone, and content in ways that help engage readers. indissoluble connection” with readers depends on the author’s understanding, as stage and screen actress Shirley Booth said after winning an Academy Award in 1952, that “the audience is 50 percent of the performance.” Writing has the power to answer questions during times of trouble. As President Kennedy stated, “I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time, *The Missiles of October*,” he told his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. “If anyone is around to write after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace. Douglas E. Abrams and every effort to give our adversary room to move.” As crisis effects society, literature is needed to tell stories of the unknown, to answer questions, and to provide dialogue during crisis.

The Need to Tell Stories

The need to tell stories, to use narrative is to prove that there is some continuity with the past that has been taken away from the pandemic. Many have been startled by the speed of the virus and how its arrival has transformed lives. However, authors and their literature have envisioned such emergencies centuries ago. Novels such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* became groundbreaking to understanding the meaning of the pandemic. It was almost 200 years since Shelley asked how a society could be ready to withstand a global pandemic. Written in 1826, the story envisioned an emergency of a deadly plague that began in Asia and spread rapidly across Earth, as her analyses and conclusions were familiar to the COVID-19 virus. Literature has become an affirmation for saying within a pandemic, and gives a voice that has a strong presence, despite its effects to wither bodies. Literature becomes a voice that cannot be abolished, it bears a type of witness, even if it is in solitary. Shelley used a futuristic Britain to show the effects of how a plague could globally devastate society, as the story focuses on the value of friendship, and uses a sheep dog to show how pets are a source of comfort and stability during a time of crisis. The novel shows the effects of institutional responses to the plague.

Other novels, such as the 1842, *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allen Poe, shows the failures of authority figures to adequately and humanely respond to a disaster. *The Red Death* provides a plot which the outside world would be able to take care of itself. Poe used the character, Prince Prospero to gather a thousand courtiers into a secluded but luxurious abbey, welds the gates closed and hosts a masked ball. Poe details the sumptuous festivities, concluding with the incorporeal arrival of the Red Death as a human-like guest at the ball. The plague personified takes the prince’s life and then those of his courtiers.

Among modern and contemporary literature, authors such as *The Stand* by Stephen King and *Fever* by Deon Meyer provide readers a story that brings attention to the social implications of plague-like pandemics, especially those using isolation and the failures of the state to either contain disease or to moderate an ensuing panic. Literature such as each story creates an anxious awareness of the value of human contact and the relationship of citizens during a pandemic. In *The Stand*, it is a bio-engineered super-flu named “Project Blue” that leaks out of an American military base, as a pandemic develops. King recently stated on social media that the COVID-19 virus was not as serious as the fictional pandemic of *The Stand*, as King urged the public to take reasonable precautions. In *Fever*, Meyer created an apocalyptic fallout of a weaponized, bio-engineered virus that resulted in an enclave of survivors besieging one another for resources. Both novels provide a preview of the troubled effects of a pandemic within the confines of fiction writing. The authors used survival and the ability to assimilate culturally to isolation, along with theorizing the alternative social structures that could be experienced during a pandemic for the reader. This shows the important role that writing has when telling a story from a pandemic point of view.

Conclusion

Literature provides meaning to the reader, as most readers of pandemic literature are used to share memories, to make sense, to warm, and to exclaim that we are still here. Narrative can preserve and remake the world as it falls apart. This would be the point of telling any story. Illness reminds the reader that the world is theirs, but also opens the reader up to experiencing the inner world, thoughts, and experiences of pandemic living. It is through literature and writing, which has the ability to teach readers about the effects of the deadly manifestations on humanity, and how they shape what it means to be human. Authors use people as the stories they tell, and in a time of pandemic these stories show how readers will live through this crisis and, ultimately, build a brighter tomorrow.

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