

Pandemics and Literature: Exploring the Depiction of Disease in Poetry

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Abstract

Literature has witnessed diverse changes in its form, style, expression and genre with time. It has evolved with the evolution of society and expanding in vision. With changing trends, literature has also been understood according to new perspectives, ideas and thoughts. The change that COVID-19 has brought in the lifestyle of masses across the globe has given rise to a new way of decoding literary works. This new vision has given rise not only to a new theme of writing but also provided a new way of looking at some untouched works from the past that directly or indirectly talked about disease, its spread and the psychological impact of pandemic. The paper traces the influence of pandemic prevalent in English poetry where there are evidences of loss, pain and devastation intermixed with a sense of hope and strength. It covers selected poems that discuss factors associated with pandemic and reiterate the depiction of state of survivors during the outbreak. Poetry is one major genre of literature that has its own vivid impact over the readers. The paper is going to discuss some influential writers like Elizabeth Bishop and W.B. Yeats and the meanings behind their works.

Keywords: Pandemic Poetry, COVID-19, Psychoanalysis, Quarantine, Influenza.

Introduction

The condition of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the emergence of a new genre known as the Pandemic Literature. Its existence has very much been a part of the English literature but has not been widely discussed as compared to other fields of Literature. With repetitive usage of the term in articles and journals, it has been characterised by those works that discuss pandemic and pandemic-related situations. From classical age pandemic has been a subject of concern in literary works but it was discussed in patches. The present time has given an opportunity to the writers, readers and critics to explore more into this field.

Pandemic poetry, among other subparts of the Pandemic literature, has rather wider dimensions to understand first hand situations in a more emotionally triggering light. Where novels and short stories turn out to be an expression of life in detail, poetry takes diverse snapshots of those expressions. Pandemic poetry is not confined to the bars of pandemic outbreak only. Rather, it covers works that have been written in similar circumstances where parallels can be drawn and solutions can be sought. The meaning of survival that lays in the artistic flair of the poets can be analysed even in the tone and diction that they use. From poets like Christina Rossetti to local lesser known poets, from advanced rhythmic poems to scribbled writings, each work has a story behind it, a perspective with which it has been written, some real experiences, some fictional and a sense of belonging.

Ring A' Ring O' Roses
A pocket full of posies
A tissue, a tissue
We all fall down

This popular nursery rhyme has been a part of childhood memories for people across the globe. It is generally perceived as a part of some playful activity but has also been criticised by many scholars as a poem symbolic of depiction some disease. Popular among them was James Fitzgerald who claimed the rhyme to be written around the Great Plague of London (a disastrous spread of bubonic plague in 1665). He analysed it to be directed at the state of people during the spread of the plague. The ring around the roses as mentioned in the rhyme symbolizes the reddish pink rashes which were a symptom of the plague infection. The posies which refer to the bouquet of flowers signify the message of prayer for the betterment of the patients suffering terribly. The tissue is also a reference to the directions that might have been necessary during the contagion. "We all fall down" is suggestive of an approaching death that is inescapable.

Many critics have analysed the rhyme with their own understanding of the poem and so this gives a broad and diverse approach to a small nursery rhyme. This rhyme has survived through centuries and is still popular among children around the world which can be perceived as a hidden hope of survival through difficult times. This also signifies strength that makes humans live through difficult situations and do not lose faith. The roses and posies symbolise bond and unity the binds humanity together. The perceived notion works on the understanding of the reader and so the rhyme states both devastation and the will to rise again.

Pandemic instances are also written as firsthand experiences like “The Plague” (1896) written by Christina Rossetti. The poem has terrifying imagery. Death runs as a central theme in the poem. The beginning of the poem goes like:

“Listen, the last stroke of death’s noon has struck-
The plague is come”

These lines resonate with those of Faustus in Marlowe’s play *Doctor Faustus* (15) where he fears that “the clock will strike; / the devil will come” (II. 76-7). The poem talks about the uncertainty of death and how it haunts the very spirit of human beings. The same shared fate of losing near and dear ones has been depicted with striking images. She has also explained how death brings a state of ignorance and loss of emotions when it becomes a regular visitor. Rossetti has been successful in bringing out the fact that when death becomes a regular episode it makes people detached from sentiments:

“Then all is over. With a careless chuck
Among his fellows he is cast. How sped
His spirits matter little: many dead
Make men hard-hearted.”

Witnessing death can change the perception of seeing life. The corpse becomes a thing and ignorance becomes an escape. Not entirely positive, this poem portrays the mental state of humans. The idea of losing leads to hopelessness when people vanish in seconds. Through such poems, parallels can be drawn to the COVID-19 pandemic where thousands of people died in a day and the corpses could not be managed easily. The past becomes the present when poems closely identify reality.

Winston Churchill, a very influential political figure of America, also captured his experiences of the flu during his teenage years. His poem “The Influenza” written in 1890 preserved the spread of influenza and its impact. The initial lines of the poem claim the disaster that fell upon the entire globe. Disease cannot be predicted nor can its consequences be controlled. This poem is written from the point of view of an aware young boy of fifteen which shows the significance of recording the damage of the flu. The poem is highly metaphoric tracing the boundaries infected by the disease:

“From China’s bright celestial land
E’en to Arabia’s thirsty sand
It journeyed with the sun.”

Churchill’s attempt to depict the power and roots of the flu outlines the COVID-19 pandemic. It is relatable to a great extent to the present situation. The conclusion talks about the fading time of the disease where it is about to end and sets a positive tone through offering prayers to God. Churchill’s poem stands out as an example of survival through highs and lows.

Pandemic poetry, as mentioned earlier, is not confined to the discussion of pandemic. It also includes works that draw similar conditions as experienced during a pandemic. Loss and grief runs as a major theme in the genre. So poems that eventually give psychological flash similar to this can also be kept in the category. Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One Art” (1976) speaks a lot about loss.

“The art of losing isn’t hard to master
So many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.”

The lines imply that coming to terms with losing your loved ones makes loss a natural and acceptable thing. The advice here is keep the pace of your life in accordance with time or it becomes difficult to survive. The poem was written as a personal experience where the poet has lost her family at an early age. COVID-19 proved to be cruel to many in similar ways. “The hour badly spent” must also be lost with time as is directly advised by the poet. The poems shares pain with the present and hope to recover from both physical as well as mental scars.

Among works that deliberated upon the state of suffering, loss, strength and hope, there are poems that talk about the environment people lived in during the state of emergencies. An interesting poem in the list is “The Stare’s Nest by My Window” written by W.B. Yeats (originally appeared in 1924) that mentions quarantine period as experienced by the poet. It is believed to be written around the time when Spanish Flu had its grip and there was a state of civil war. The background, though more associated with war, describes the psychological state of a man being confined to four walls:

“We are closed in and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere”

The poet’s state of mind works depicts universal impact over the quarantine conditions. Uncertainty, fear, restlessness and chaos are inescapable emotions in such restrictions. Yeats was able to define the keen sense of observing the slightest movements around his environment through his poetry. The description of bees, birds and flies that otherwise remain unnecessary to notice show how spare time gives curiosity to return to the basic things in life. The COVID-19 quarantine period has also shared similar experiences of revisiting old hobbies and experimentation at home. Pandemic poetry works as a bridge between literature and reality during a pandemic. These poems provide a sense of belonging to the survivors of pandemic.

James B. Young in his article ‘Poet’s Pen: Two “Plague Poems”’ describes that Christina Rossetti’s “The Plague” “focuses our attention on the precipitous presentation of that scourge with a victim’s rapid withering and frequently death. It reminds me of COVID-19 patients...”

Churchill’s poem about the flu has also been discussed as a popular pandemic poem. Andrew Roberts in his article “Churchill and Influenza: Lessons of Leadership and Courage” discuss the poem as a major text describing “geographically” affected areas in the poem. He considers Churchill’s words as “a mixture of teenage rhyming juvenilia” with occasional linguistic patterns he used during war premiership.

Joseph M Hassett in his article “WB Yeats, the Spanish flu and experiment in quarantine” writes that Yeats’ poem “The Stare’s Nest by My Window describes the circumstances of its origin in terms that resonate with the fear and anxiety we suffer while locked in, physically and psychologically, by Covid-19...” The impact of the poem is relevant for the present scenario in more than one way.

The poems discussed above portray the case of variations with which pandemic poems are written, analysed and understood. Perspective and motive behind writing as well as reading plays an important role in the existence of such works. The relevance of these poems lies in their similarity with reality. The purpose of reading and analysing this genre during the spread of COVID-19 pandemic is to recognize the poems as a part of reader’s own experience. The most depressing and challenging parts of life and instances of literature provide us with clarity and hope. Pandemic Poetry turns out to be a convenient means to understand the psychology of humanity that survives as songs of despair as well as hope.

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