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PANDEMIC MOTIVES IN JACK LONDON'S WORKS

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is profoundly affecting life around the globe. Isolation, contact restrictions and economic shutdown impose a complete change to the psychosocial environment in affected countries. We have all been affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, the impact of the pandemic and its consequences are felt differently depending on our status as individuals and as members of society. While some try to adapt to working online, homeschooling their children and ordering food, others have no choice but to be exposed to the virus while keeping society functioning.

Jack London (1876–1916) was an American writer and journalist and author of classic novels including “The Call of the Wild” (1903), “White Fang” (1906) and “Martin Eden” (1909). He was also an active member of the Socialist Party of America, and his works often contained explicit critiques against capitalism and war. Numerous stories London wrote would today be classified as science fiction, and some had pandemics and infectious diseases as subjects.

“The Scarlet Plague” is a post-apocalyptic fiction novel written by Jack London and originally published in *London Magazine* in 1912. The topic was mentioned is very similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given London wrote it at a time when the world was not as quickly connected by travel as it is today. The story takes place in 2073, sixty years after an uncontrollable epidemic, the Red Death has depopulated the planet. James Smith is one of the survivors of the era before the scarlet plague hit and is still left alive in the San Francisco area, and he travels with his grandsons Edwin, Hoo-Hoo, and Hare-Lip. His grandsons are young and live as primeval hunter-gatherers in a heavily depopulated world. Their intellect is limited, as are their language abilities. Edwin asks Smith, whom they call “Granser”, to tell them of the disease alternately referred to as scarlet plague, scarlet death, or red death [4].

Smith recounts the story of his life before the plague, when he was an English professor. In 2013, the year after “Morgan the Fifth was appointed President of the United States by the Board of Magnates”, the disease came about and spread rapidly. Sufferers would turn scarlet, particularly on the face, and become numb in their lower extremities. Victims usually died within 30 minutes of first seeing symptoms. Despite the public’s trust in doctors and scientists, no cure is found, and those who attempted to do so were also killed by the disease. The grandsons question Smith’s belief in “germs” causing the illness because they cannot be seen.

Smith witnesses his first victim of the scarlet plague while teaching when a young woman’s face turns scarlet. She dies quickly, and panic soon overtakes the campus. He returns home but his family refuses to join him because they fear he is infected. Soon, an epidemic overtakes the area and residents begin rioting and killing one another. Smith

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meets with colleagues at his college's chemistry building, where they hope to wait out the problem. They soon realize they must move elsewhere for safety and begin trekking northward.

Shortly, Smith's family and friends die out and he is left as the sole survivor. He lives for three years on his own with the company of a pony and two dogs. Eventually, his need for social interaction compels him back to the San Francisco area in search of other people. He finally discovers a sort of new society has been created with a few survivors, who have broken into tribes. Smith worries that he is the last to remember the times before the plague. He reminisces about the quality of food, social classes, his job, and technology. As he realizes his time grows short, he tries to impart the value of knowledge and wisdom to his grandsons. His efforts are in vain, however, as the children ridicule his recollections of the past, which sound totally unbelievable to them.

The "Scarlet Plague" feels contemporary because it allows modern readers to reflect on the worldwide fear of pandemics, moreover it's our Coronavirus reality.

By exploring the motif of the plague, a consistent and well-researched topic in literature, London's novel is a part of a long literary tradition, inviting the reader to reflect on the ancestral fear of humans toward infectious diseases. In the ancient world, plague and pestilence were rather frequent calamities, and ordinary people were likely to have witnessed or heard vivid and scary reports about their terrible ravages. When plague spread, no medicine could help, and no one could stop it from striking; the only way to escape was to avoid contact with infected people and contaminated objects. Immense fright was also fueled by a belief in the supernatural origin of pandemics, which were often believed to be provoked by offenses against divinities. In the Bible, the plague was viewed as one of God's punishments for sins, so the frightening description of its spread was interpreted as a warning to the Israelites to behave morally. This causal relationship between plague and sin is seen also in Greek literary texts, such as Homer's "Iliad" and Sophocles' "Oedipus" [4].

In "The Scarlet Plague," London investigated many traditional issues of the literary topic of plague, ranging from a reflection on morality and justice to the contagion and clinical features of the disease. The writer investigates behavioral responses to a pandemic, showing the emergence of fear, irrationality, and selfishness in a previously civilized society. London made the plague more realistic and even more frightening: "The heart began to beat faster and the heat of the body to increase. Then came the scarlet rash, spreading like wildfire over the face and body. Most persons never noticed the increase in heat and heartbeat, and the first they knew was when the scarlet rash came out. Usually, they had convulsions at the time of the appearance of the rash. But these convulsions did not last long and were not very severe. ... The heels became numb first, then the legs, and hips, and when the numbness reached as high as his heart he died." The defeat of the science and medicine in which the people had placed trust generated fear in the population. London gave detailed insight into the human reactions to the spread of the disease: "Thursday night the panic outrushes for the country began. Imagine, my grandsons, people, thicker than the salmon-run you have seen on the Sacramento river, pouring out of the cities by millions, madly over the country, in vain attempt to escape the ubiquitous death" [1].

The disease was spreading, fast and uncontrolled. Nothing could stop it, and the world was in a state of sheer panic never experienced before. Some people tried in vain to isolate

themselves and fled to avoid the contagion, whereas a minority, mainly rioters, begun drinking, robbing, and sometimes even killing.

The American novelist used the plague topic to criticize contemporary social structure: the destruction that follows the plague is both to be welcomed and despised. Indeed, the pandemic breaks the class barriers, but it also leads to the ruin of civilization. According to London's socialist values, only human kindness and cohesion enables society to survive.

London's work inspires reflection on the role of media during pandemics. In London's novel, newspapers, wires, and phone calls were the only tools for obtaining information on epidemic spread: "The man who sent this news, the wireless operator, was alone with his instrument on the top of a lofty building. He was a hero, that man who stayed by his post – an obscure newspaperman, most likely" [1]. Today, the main sources of information on pandemics are widely available and include mass media such as television and radio, and social media such as Instagram and Facebook. In London's novel, the role of media seems to be positive (the "newspaperman" was looked upon as a hero, similarly to bacteriologists), but in modern times, the media are generally accused of exaggerating the risks of an epidemic and contributing to public misunderstandings of public health research evidence. Media reporting can sometimes appear to lower trust in scientific evidence, guiding public fear and spreading widely and almost instantaneously false information and exaggerated panic in public opinion.

In our time, despite the development of medicine, infectious diseases and germs continue to generate fear, as recently demonstrated by the worldwide Coronavirus epidemic. Now is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies, particularly in the emerging and developing world. Only together can we overcome the intertwined health and social and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a protracted humanitarian and food security catastrophe, with the potential loss of already achieved development gains.

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