

Dystopian Images Painted by Disease in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

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ABSTRACT

The after-effects of a pandemic outbreak in literature are generally shown through a world driven by chaos. The resulting fear from the deaths and suffering cause delusions of a never-ending trauma initiated by witnessing the ill and their pain. This research paper examines the theme of disease in Jack London's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Scarlet Plague*. Set in the year 2073, the story addresses the devastating effects of a global pandemic that decimates civilization. The impact of the pandemic is captured through the distorted society that seeks new life amidst challenge of finding possibilities of survival. This paper explores the societal collapse resulting from the disease, the physical and psychological impact on individuals, and the themes of human resilience and adaptation in the face of adversity. This research paper aims to delve into the theme of disease in the novel, analysing its depiction, impact, and broader implications. By examining the collapse of society, the physical and psychological toll on the characters, and the theme of resilience, this paper sheds light on London's exploration of the human condition in the wake of a catastrophic pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic, Disease, Dystopia, Plague, Post-apocalyptic

INTRODUCTION

The Scarlet Plague by Jack London presents a dystopian vision of the future, where the world is ravaged by a deadly disease. Written in 1912, the novel provides a vision of a world imagined as a chaotic social web driven by the horrors of pandemic. The story takes the readers back to a social setup where primitive practices like hunting-gathering are the source of their livelihood. From language to technology, the accessibility has become specifically confined and the surviving society is left with limited resources. Jack London gives a picture similar to the probability of a future deprived of the inventions that people of the twentieth century have witnessed.

Twentieth century is known for the scientific and technological advancements in the field of transport, communication and medicine. Darwin's theory of evolution and Mendel's discovery on genetic structure have given a way for other scientists to understand various diseases, their cause and cure. London's novel specifically addresses the lack of all of those discoveries in a post-pandemic world where only the survivors of previous generation reminisce the luxury that the science and technology provided. James Smith while recollecting the past gives the idea of how the pandemic was an unconquerable enemy which even the scientists could not get a hold of. The germ theory that provided a new form to understand the microbes and therefore the nature of the disease has been mentioned in the novel that shows the influence of twentieth century knowledge in forming the narrative:

And it was because of all this that the bacteriologists had so little chance in fighting the germs. They were killed in their laboratories even as they studied the germ of the Scarlet Death. They were heroes. As fast as they perished, others stepped forth and took their places. It was in London that they first isolated it. The news was telegraphed everywhere. Trask was the name of the man who succeeded in this, but within thirty hours he was dead. Then came the struggle in all the laboratories to find something that would kill the plague germs. All drugs failed. (London 75-76)

While London's work is written during what is popularly called the 'Progressive Era', the nature of problems, from socio-political to economic, also form a part of the novel. Political reverberations, including the tensions of World War I, occur in the novel as the implications of the pandemic. Tuberculosis and Cholera have been major causes of extensive decrease in population which worsened during the twentieth century. The purpose of writing a novel that can globally affect population has become a major inspiration for the theme of London's work.

In *The Scarlet Plague*, London's portrayal of human nature amidst the pandemic contemplates various aspects of humanity. The choices and actions of humans reflect the spectrum of their behaviour and shed light on both the darker and more hopeful aspects of human nature. Some characters exhibit selfishness, greed, and a willingness to exploit others for personal gain. Their actions highlight the potential for moral decay and the erosion of societal

norms in times of crisis. Smith, in his recollection, mentions his decision to not help people various times to ensure his own survival:

Here I was blocked by an advancing conflagration. The buildings on both sides were burning, and the street was filled with smoke and flame. From somewhere in that murk came a woman's voice calling shrilly for help. But I did not go to her. A man's heart turned to iron amid such scenes, and one heard all too many appeals for help.(105)

There are also characters who demonstrate compassion, resilience, and a sense of community. These individuals prioritize cooperation and mutual support, emphasizing the capacity for empathy and solidarity even in the direst circumstances. London's exploration of human nature reflects their own capacity for both selfishness and altruism.

The novel discusses the past in a form that future is imagined. The practices common for Smith before the outbreak of the Scarlet Plague are astonishing and unknown to his grandsons. The change of society from advanced to basic also directs at a future outcome driven by disease.

When I was a boy, Edwin, men and women and little babies used to come out here from San Francisco by tens of thousands on a nice day. And there weren't any bears then. No, sir. They used to pay money to look at them in cages, they were that rare."

"What is money, Granser?" (18)

The disease is often portrayed as a swift and merciless force, preventing individuals from saying their final goodbyes or leaving behind any form of communication. The appearance of plague as described in the novel brings to surface the devastating figures that have been printed deep inside the hearts of the survivors. From leaving people behind in order to survive and keeping their memories intact in recollections, the plague has gripped human minds for ages to suffer. The society becomes dystopian for Smith because of how plague has snatched the lifestyle he had been enjoying as a normal human being. The unknown facts for the people living in 2073 have once been a part of basic knowledge and practice. Smith, a former professor of English literature, undergoes a drastic transformation due to the disease. Once a man of intellectual pursuits, he becomes a hardened survivor, adapting to the harsh post-pandemic world. The disease strips away his scholarly identity, forcing him to confront the brutal realities of survival. As the narrative progresses, he exhibits resourcefulness, leadership, and a protective instinct towards his grandchildren, displaying a resilience born out of necessity. He also becomes the symbol of the past generation well aware of the fact that his cultural practices have become scarce due to the disease:

Where four million people disported themselves, the wild wolves roam to-day, and the savage progeny of our loins, with prehistoric weapons, defend themselves against the fanged despoilers. Think of it! And all because of the Scarlet Death — " The adjective had caught Hare-Lip's ear."He's always saying that," he said to Edwin. "What is scarlet?"

The above dialogue shows how language has been affected as devastatingly as the culture. The language, like culture, has become primitive and basic as compared to the time before the Scarlet Plague has wiped the population globally. The words that have been a part of common vocabulary around 2013 are now alien to the new generation. This is another sign of the dystopia where technology must be built from the scratch.

The Scarlet Plague presents a haunting portrayal of a global pandemic and its catastrophic consequences. This research paper has explored the theme of disease in the novel, examining the themes of resilience and adaptation. London's narrative invites readers to reflect on the fragility of civilization, the human capacity for survival, and the potential consequences of unchecked progress. Through the analysis of *The Scarlet Plague*, it becomes evident that London's novel offers a cautionary tale about the consequences of disregarding the potential threats posed by diseases and the importance of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. The exploration of these themes provides valuable insights into human nature, societal dynamics, and the capacity for both to reform amidst global crisis. It highlights the importance of resilience, adaptability, and compassion in navigating and rebuilding a post-pandemic world.

Pandemic narratives give a vision to the consequences that possibly hit the generation of the future. Jack London's novel resonates with an advanced version of depicting the primitivity in *Oryx and Crake* written by Margaret Atwood a century later. London's vision captures the outcomes imagined by many writers in the later years of the twentieth century as well as the writers of the twenty-first century. Virginia Woolf's concerns, in her work *On Being Ill*, about the lack of popularity of disease in fiction due to limited metaphoric vocabulary has been countered through London's work. This novel is a perfect example of how basic vocabulary becomes a part of necessary knowledge in keeping record of the disease and its repercussions.

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