

# Literature as a Reflection of Societies' Challenges

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the issues of the role of Literature, Art and Mass media in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Society. Having started with the analysis of the motif of the Plague and Pestilence in the world literature, we turned to the modern perception of COVID-19 in the modern “digital literature” and art. It has been proved that in the times of uncertainty and troubles people tend to turn to poetry as to the source of inspiration and stoicism, trying to draw the picture of the word after the pandemic and therefore get hope and the reference point. Nowadays, we are standing on the urge of global changes caused by COVID-19, which will influence all the areas of our lives. However, it is the first pandemic in a new “digital” era, in the time of social networking sites. For the first time in the history of humankind, every person can not only be the passive reader or observer, but to contribute and share in the Internet his own story of survival or fight which will be watched and read by millions of others. The virus gives us the sad impetus to stop and rethink our actions and values. But what conclusions will be made by a modern society? We will learn about it later.

**Keywords:** *Literary heritage; plague; pestilence; poetry; mass media; social networking sites.*

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## 1. Introduction

Being formed at the second part of the XXth century, postmodernism shapes today and the assumptions the majority of people share and live accordingly nowadays.

Currently, postmodern world faces challenges stipulated by COVID-19. However, if modernism considers changes and crises as something negative and tries to overcome them by returning to a state of stability, then for postmodernism they are not at all deviations. Rather, they indicate a transition to a post-industrial or information society. As A. Giddens (1991) noted, when the “general climate of uncertainty” arises, it affects the individual’s sense of self and identity, and crises become the norm in social life. We live in a world that accumulates these risks, which are the price of modern civilization and technology (Plachciak, 2010). However, at the moments of greatest danger, in particular a pandemic, a postmodern man is able to find the strength to abandon hedonistic values and return to the origins of humanism through the discovery of the sense of the text. According to the idea of the nonlinearity of the text by Jacques Derrida (2000), modern thinking can not be represented linearly in the form of a book or a letter. Hypertext, which can be described by the postmodernism principles as multimedia, heterogeneity, ambiguity and intertextuality, turned out to be extremely in tune with the post-modern situation and most adequately represents new relationships with reality. Thus, it is essential to comprehend the scope of problems in the postmodernism society, which were uncovered by COVID-19 and witness and foresee the global changes which shift the common cultural paradigm from face-face world to on-line communication environment, that in its turn stipulate the new turn of postmodernism studies.

Literature is a comprehensive content linking art, in particular the art of words, with the realities of the modern society. It is that harbor where a person appears as an orator, seeking his expression through the proclaimed word, presenting his thoughts, aspirations, hopes and dreams. Undisputed is the fact of the impact of literature on the society life. Its invaluable contribution is into the understanding and recognition of the social-cultural context of all those changes that the postmodern society brought to us. As we know, the contextual basis of the culture of such a society emphasizes on the diversity or “variability”, excessive universality or “rigidity” (Bauman, 2000) but a free choice, and the ability to critically express thoughts are retained. It is also characterized by mobility of a people movement and increased consumption of goods and services as an indispensable element,

restricting society (Plachciak, 2010). However, as people become more involved in technology, their self-esteem becomes more open to the many hidden “self” offered by such technologies, which leads to a smoother personality structure (Dunn & Castro, 2012). But, this globalized and high-tech world is still fraught with its risks and threats. As we observe today, the Coronavirus that deprived all of our mobility freedom, has subordinated our life rhythm to his determined schedule of isolation. What positive and negative will it bring to us and what the humanity will be able to rethink? Could we get an esthetic pleasure immersing ourselves into the world of literature in the times of trouble? What are we trying to find in it?

The aim of the study is to elucidate the steady impact of literary heritage works in a pandemic modern society and to try to imagine the world after. The object of the study is the literature dedicated to various epidemics that happened in different eras in the history of human kind. The focus is on the role and meaning of literature in the support and self-realization of people's eternal desire to be the historian of his time.

## 2. Pandemics and Literature

For thousands of years, in the times of uncertainty people are turning to literature, trying to find solace, discharge, support, and also find the answers to pressing questions. Currently it is becoming increasingly relevant as well.

Today, when the world is living through the most devastating in the recent times pandemic, many and many of us are turning to poetry as a source of inspiration and stoicism, trying to draw the picture of the world AFTER, which gives the hope and desire to live.

In confirmation of this trend, we can hear and observe the citations of various poetic works appearing so much often in media and social networks.

On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in Twitter appeared the last few minutes of the News broadcast on RTE channel (2020), which was finished with the poem written by one of the Ireland's most famous poets Derek Mahon (2000) “Everything is going to be all right”.

*How should I not be glad to contemplate  
the clouds clearing beyond the dormer window  
and a high tide reflected on the ceiling?  
There will be dying, there will be dying,  
but there is no need to go into that.*

*The poems flow from the hand unbidden  
and the hidden source is the watchful heart.*

By the same desire to draw the picture of the life after, in the times of uncertainty, can be explained the boom of the poem “Pozvol'te, zhiteli strany,” [Please, the citizens allow me] in Russian speaking Instagram, which was published at the accounts of many famous people as Alfred Koh (2020) and such celebrities as Yana Rudkovskaya (2020) , including even the websites of South Ural State Medical University (2020, March).

<i>Pozvol'te, zhiteli strany,</i>	<i>Please, the citizens allow me</i>
<i>V chasy dushevnogo muchen'ya</i>	<i>In the times of troubles</i>
<i>Pozdravit' vas iz zatochen'ya</i>	<i>To congratulate you from the captivity</i>
<i>S velikim prazdnikom vesny!</i>	<i>With the celebration of the spring!</i>
<i>Vsyo utryasyotsya, vsyo proidyot,</i>	<i>Everything will be OK, everything will</i>
<i>Ujdut pechali i trevogi,</i>	<i>pass,</i>
<i>Vnov' stanut gladkimi dorogi</i>	<i>The troubles and the sadness,</i>
<i>I sad, kak prezhde, zacvetyot.</i>	<i>Again the roads will be smooth</i>
<i>Na pomoshch' razum prizovyom,</i>	<i>And garden will blossom again.</i>
<i>Smetyom bolezni' siloj znaniy</i>	<i>We will address the power of knowledge,</i>
<i>I dni tyazhyolyh ispytaniy</i>	<i>And kill the disease</i>
<i>Odnou sem'yoj perezhivoyom</i>	<i>And the days of trouble</i>
	<i>Will live through as one big family.</i>

Translated by Svitlana Zubenko

This poem was at first mistakenly attributed to Alexander Pushkin, who might have written it in the times of his Cholera quarantine in Boldino. However, later it was proved by Evgeniy Chernih (2020) in the Russian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda that it was the poem of the modern writer from Kazakhstan, Urri Grim (2020), a “network poet” who wrote this poem in the manner very similar to Pushkin (1959), and very close to our hearts today. As we can see, the phrases and images in both poems aim to give hope to people and help us to imagine the future that will come after the COVID-19.

However, despite the fact that this time the humanity faces huge challenges, it is not the first time the humanity faces the pandemic. The history of humankind is intertwined with such devastating diseases as plague, smallpox, cholera, typhoid, Spanish flu and many others. By exploring the motif of plague and pestilence in Literature it is worth to say that it has a

long lasting tradition starting from the Bible where the fears of people in front of infectious diseases of unexplainable origin are expressed. Plague and pestilence, at that time, were viewed as a punishment for sins. "All through Old Testament plague is regarded <...> as a direct consequence of God's anger" (Crawfurd, 1914).

"But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague." (Numbers 11-12:33).

Indeed, such a spectacularly presented symbolism is a rather effective way of depicting the horror caused by plague and pestilence that prevailed at that time. By this people tried to explain unknown and unexplainable at that time.

Very similar interpretation of plague and pestilence can be seen in the painting of Nicholas Poussin (1593-1665) "The plague of Ashdod" in which there are terrifying images of swarms of rats, invading the city, dead and dying of every age at the streets, priest, a dead women with bared breasts lying between two infants, one of which is dead. Here again the pestilence is figured as a sign of God's displeasure. And "An angel is the agent by which HE spreads the plague" (Crawfurd, 1914).

This image appears again and again in Christian literature and art.

In the writings by Giovanni Bocaccio "The Decameron" and "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer the authors demonstrate the human behavior during the times of pestilence, when the fear of contagion and illness increase the vices such as avarice, greed and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and thus to both moral and physical death. Similar changes in the human behavior: the morality, justice, irrational fear and selfishness can be traced in "The Scarlet Plague" which was published by Jack London (2017). However, after the scientific discoveries made by Lois Pasteur and Robert Koch, which changed the perception of the nature of the infectious disease and demonstrated that it was caused by germs, described the ways of transmitting the disease as well as the methods to stop pandemic which got its reflection in literature. "Disease is never merely medical <...>, contagion is not only literal." (Cooke, 2009). Writing of plague and other epidemic diseases can be marked as "feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched by meanings) is projected onto the world" (Cooke, 2009).

Camus's novel "The Plague" (2005), which was published two years after the end of the Second World War, in which the author was reacting to the horrors of Nazi occupation and millions of deaths. "Camus's twentieth

century plague aligns, too, with other thinkers and writers of the 1930s and 1940s who used plague to criticize fascism and dictatorship” (Cooke, 2009).

Current outbreak of the infectious disease is perceived differently. Many believe that it is a signal for self-destructing society to “stop and stare” to look at the beauty of the world, the beauty of life which goes unnoticed in the daily routine of non-stopping consumerism.

*What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.  
No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.  
No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.  
No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.*  
(W. H. Davis, 1911)

### 3. Pandemic in the Internet era

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 persons and contaminated objects (Tognotti, 2013). The same measures are taken nowadays. People are locked in their houses and get information only through mass media. As Jerry Hauer said, “The whole issue of dealing with the media when it comes to bioterrorism is something that has been ignored. The media are either going to be an ally in getting information out or a foe in increasing panic” (Hauer, as cited by Garrett, 2001). And the mass media and social networking sites today are responsible where will be panic or not. Since, anything, written in any part of the world can be read in any other part of the world in seconds, the issues of Media Literacy, the ability to analyze, evaluate will help us to differentiate facts from fiction are becoming more and more important nowadays. It will help us to become resistant to all manifestations of panic in the name of avoiding more complex and destructive situations.

Art and literature are facing a challenge, but in the digital era you do not need literally to go to the Library to get an excess to a book or any resource, social networking sites and the Internet have completely changed our lives. At this stage, we are witnessing a surge in Internet creativity as a new manifestation of literature that reflects the mood of the world's population. At the same time, social networks implicitly created the

necessary space for all of us to exchange and express own opinions. We really get the greatest opportunity to connect and to keep in touch with other people. We can share their experiences and fillings in just in an instant. It helps us to avoid being alone but be together now and here. Is it true that speed changes everything and contributes to the fact that many things in our life become smoother (Chen, 2012) while reproducing a single social space for communication and mutual support. Sitting at home, people are not feeling stranded, they are members of a big community “we are separated, but we are still together”. This slogan of contemplation a mutual help is also used in the social commercial of Ukrainian company Freken Bok.

Internet expansion and the popularization of the digitalization process, made the Internet literature become a part of our everyday life. According to its most common definitions (Chen, 2012), it includes not only digitized literary works, but also works generated by the computer, published and distributed on the Internet. The development of multimedia technologies and the using of hyperlinks and hypertext have increased the educational value of such resources and making them more attractive to different segments of the population, breaking down language barriers. In the first time in the history of humankind, every person can contribute and share in the Internet his own story of survival or fight which will be watched by millions of others. Everyone can become the historian of his time being. Laughter and humor through tears is seen by the Internet users as a way to reduce the stress and express distrust to the official statistics in Ukraine: “When crossing the Ukrainian border, the Coronavirus turns into the common cold” (Komarovskiy, 2020)

Musicians and show business have their own response. Andrea Bocelli's live concert “Music for Hope – Live from Duomo di Milano” (2020, April 12) in the empty Milano cathedral on the day of Catholic Easter, was streamed in YouTube (Bocelli, 2020) and watched by 18 million viewers.

The World Health Organization (2020) and Global Citizens (2020) have announced the One World: Together at Home Virtual benefit concert for COVID-19 relief efforts.

Virtual tours around such museums as Louvre (Paris), British museum (London), Guggenheim Museum (New York), Pergamon Museum (Berlin) and many others are offered online.

Without any doubt, any musician or artist needs the direct contact with his audience. Nothing can replace the live performance. However, nowadays if art wants to survive it needs to act differently and move to online world.

#### 4. Conclusion

Definitely, the world is going to change after the challenge posed by COVID-19. And it will be reflected in the Literature. However, currently we live in a new “digital” era. The time of social networking sites. If previously, it took quite a long time to read a poem or look at the picture depicting the pandemic and it was possible to do only after it is over. Now, in the world of Internet, any news published anywhere in the world can be read in seconds in any corner of the globe and everyone can become a historian of his time.

We are sure, that these changes will take place not only in the literature, which will undoubtedly reflect the pandemic’s sad moods, the bitterness of the loss of loved ones, and descriptions of the deserted streets of Rome and the beaches of the Greek islands. But there will be also the positive emotions of admiration and gratitude for the street concerts in Spain, Italy, Canada etc., and thanksgiving words to all the doctors worldwide.

We are sure that literary wealth has not lost its value to society by looking at the intensification of literary works citations in the media and user appeals (uploadings) to networks. We also draw vitality and inspiration from it. To this day, it serves to humanity as the greatest reminder of what happened, because it realistically captured a picture of the past. Literature accumulates the experience gained by mankind in the struggle for survival, and in difficult days drags our attention to it. It is possible that in our race to build a high-tech globalized society, at some point, we forgot about our humanity. So, now, we have this time. It is time to revise and follow the path of the rebirth and rethinking of our actions and values. What is the conclusion we made for ourselves, well, we will be able to know about this much later.

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