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# Plague and Literature in Western Europe, from Giovanni Boccaccio to Albert Camus

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**ABSTRACT**

In medieval times the plague hit Europe between 1330 and 1350. The Italian novelist Giovanni Boccaccio, one of the exponents of the cultural movement of Humanism, in the introduction (proem) of his "*Decameron*" described the devastating effects of the 'black plague' on the inhabitants of the city of Florence. The pestilence returned to Western Europe in several waves, between the 16th and 17th centuries. William Shakespeare in "*Romeo and Juliet*" and other tragedies, and Ben Jonson in "*The Alchemist*" made several references to the plague, but they did not offer any realistic description of that infective disease. Some decennials later Daniel Defoe, in his "*A Journal of the Plague Year*" (1719), gave a detailed report about the 'Great Plague' which hit England in 1660, based on documents of the epoch. In more recent times, Thomas S. Eliot, composing his poem "*The Waste Land*" was undoubtedly influenced by the spreading of another infective disease, the so-called "Spanish flu", which affected him and his wife in December 1918. Some decennials later, the French writer and philosopher Albert Camus, in his novel "*The Plague*", symbolized with a plague epidemic the war which devastated Europe, North Africa and the Far East from 1937 to 1945, extolling a death toll of over 50 million victims. Those literary works offered a sort of solace to the lovers of literature. To recall them is the purpose of the present paper, in these years afflicted by the spreading of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

Every catastrophic event hitting humanity on a large scale, such as a world war or a pandemic disease, has the power to lead people to a serious meditation on the precariousness of the well-established system of social relations in force prior to the occurrence of the event. Owing to the so-called Covid-19 viral disease, which hit the entire world toward the end of 2019 and whose devastating effects are not yet concluded, the author of this paper decided to turn his gaze to the field most familiar to him, that of Italian and English literature on the subject, in the hope to receive from the works of most celebrated authors an indication on how to best react to the psychological disarray caused by it. To complete the research, our analysis has been extended to the work "The Plague" (1943) by the French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus (1943): in that work the "plague" has a meaning that goes well beyond that of "epidemic disease". The period taken into consideration in this research spans from the late Middle Ages to the first half of the twentieth century and the choice of authors has been a "self-imposed one", given their significant contribution to the subject. Our research method was based in a textual analysis of the works of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Eliot and Camus and the research papers quoted in References.

In medieval times, the bubonic plague hit Western Europe between 1330 and 1350. The novelist Giovanni Boccaccio, a precursors of Italian Renaissance, wrote between 1349 and 1351 his masterwork, the "*Decameron,*" in whose Proem (Introduction) he described, in a Florentine vernacular, the devastating effects of that epidemic on people living inside the walls and in the countryside of Florence (Boccaccio, 2007). Possibly influenced by him, Geoffrey Chaucer composed in Middle English, between 1387 and 1400, the "*Canterbury Tales*", a collection of twenty-four short stories, told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury to worship the shrine of St Thomas Becket. In the novel "*The Pardoner's Tale*" Chaucer made an explicit reference to the pestilence. The '*Black Death*', as it was then called, was attributed by clergy to God's punishment of humans for their sins, but Boccaccio avoided to mention God's intervention in this natural

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phenomenon and Chaucer attributed its spreading to low people's greed and malice. Between the 16th and 17th centuries, in Elizabethan, Jacobean and post-Jacobean times, the bubonic plague returned to Western Europe in several waves: William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson made several references to it in their works. In 1665 the last wave of the epidemic, the *Great Plague*, ravaged London. The writer and pamphleteer Daniel Defoe devoted to it, in 1722, a journalistic report entitled "*A Journal of the Plague Year*", where he offered a detailed description of the tragic evolution of that pestilence, based on documents of the epoch (Defoe, 1995). Two centuries later, influenced by the devastating phenomenon of the '*Great War*' of 1914-18 and the spreading of the so-called '*Spanish flu*' from 1917 to 1919, the American, naturalized British, poet George S. Eliot composed the poem "*The Waste Land*". Two decennials later, in the middle of the Second World War, the French writer Albert Camus composed "*The Plague*", a novel where he described with great efficacy the spreading of a fictional pestilence which should have occurred in those years in the city of Oran, in French Algeria.

The present research is subdivided into six sections: Section 1 (Introduction), Section 2 (The Black Death: *2.1 Giovanni Boccaccio and the 'Black Plague'*, *2.2 Chaucer and the "Canterbury Tales"*), Section 3 (Plague and Literature during the English Renaissance: *3.1 William Shakespeare, 3.2 Ben Jonson*), Section 4 (Daniel Defoe and the 'Great Plague' of 1665), Section 5 (From 'Modernism' to 'Engagement': *5.1 Thomas S. Eliot, 5.2 Albert Camus*), Section 6 (Conclusions).

## THE BLACK DEATH

*Many a lovely lady and their lover-knights*
*swooned and died in sorrow of Death's blows.*
*for God is deaf nowadays, and will not hear us,*
*and for our guilt he grinds good men to dust.*
William Langland, from "*Piers Plowman*" (1370-1390)

### Giovanni Boccaccio and the Black Death

Giovanni Boccaccio, the son of a Florentine merchant, was born in Certaldo, near Florence, in 1313. In 1326 he moved with the family to Naples, where his father was head of a bank. Disliking the banking profession, Giovanni studied 'Canon Law' at the local *Studium* and established a friendship with members of the ruling French dynasty of Angevins; but eventually decided to devote himself to literature.

After having been a testimony of the plague which hit the city of Florence in 1348, the next year he started writing the "*Decameron*", a collection of a hundred short stories, fictionally told in the course of ten days by a group of seven girls and three young men, who decided to get away from Florence and retire to a villa in the countryside to take refuge from the plague. In those years Boccaccio became closely involved with the cultural movement of Humanism, based on the revival of classical antiquity, which stimulated the birth of Italian Renaissance (Kristeller, 1979; Bartlett, 1992). In October 1350 he was delegated to greet the poet Francesco Petrarca, the father of *Humanism*, as the latter visited Florence. The meeting between the two was extremely fruitful: Boccaccio gave a series of lectures on Dante in 1373 and these resulted in his "*Esposizioni sopra la Commedia di Dante*" (*Commentaries about Dante's Comedy*. He died on December 21, 1375 in Certaldo, where he is buried.

Concerning the *Decameron*, the occurrence of the pestilence served him to create a frame for his work. In the Proem (Introduction) he wrote:

'*In these stories will be found love-chances, both gladsome and grievous, and other accidents of fortune befallen as well in times present as in days of old, whereof the ladies…who shall read them, may at once take solace from the delectable things therein shown forth and useful counsel, inasmuch as they may learn thereby what is to be eschewed and what is on likewise to be ensued.*'

The *Decameron* has its starting point in the plagued city, a degraded environment in which horror and brutality dominate. What strikes the author's attention is not only the rapid spreading of the disease but the fact that the plague has disrupted the social fabric of the city and has upset normal relationships even inside families. Boccaccio gives a realistic description of the symptoms of the disease:

*'…in the initiation were born to males and females likewise in the groin or under the fingers some swellings, which the people called "gavoccioli"* [*buboes*]. *And from the two parts of the body in brief space the already said deadly "gavoccioli" indifferently began in every part of that to be born: and from here they began to permute into black, bright spots … a very sure sign of future death.*'

No doctor was able to cure the disease for the novelty of the symptoms, but there were many people who pretended to be doctors, without a true knowledge of medicine. In the middle of all that, there were those who retired to an ascetic life and those who abandoned themselves to the pleasures of the flesh and the stomach. With the spreading of the infection, all the principles of affection or compassion failed: the sick were abandoned at home by their own relatives, the poor died in the streets without any help and wealthy inhabitants of Florence fled to the countryside to avoid contagion. Inside the city there were solitary funerals and burials in mass graves. In the "*Decameron*", the response of the ten storytellers to the plague was non-religious: their decision to leave the city was not that much due to the will to escape the contagion, as to the desire to build a community founded on the *courteous* values of honesty, kindness, measure, brotherhood, thus allowing civilization to take its path again.

### Chaucer and the "Canterbury Tales"

The '*Black Death*' of 1348-49 killed in eighteen months half of England's population. During the plague, many people began doubting the authority and sanctity of the Church. In addition to that, during the plague years the king and the parliament introduced laws preventing the movement of peasants to the cities, seeking better working conditions. Despite those laws, the population's decrease made new jobs available, but the government continued to introduce new laws limiting their freedom. This contributed to the *Peasants' Revolt* in 1381,

when large regions of England were involved. After several weeks of unrest and uprising, the revolt was repressed.

The writer Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) was born in London to a family of wealthy wine merchants. In 1357 he succeeded in becoming a page at the service of Elizabeth de Burg, wife of Lionel, the Duke of Clarence (the second surviving son of King Edward III) and that position brought him into contact with the close court circle. On an Italian trip he came into contact with Italian literati, possibly Petrarca or Boccaccio, who introduced him to the cultural movement of 'Humanism'. Between 1387 and 1400 he composed the "*Canterbury Tales*", a collection of 24 stories, most in verse, fictionally told by the pilgrims on their way from London to St. Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury. Chaucer painted with his work an ironic and critical portrait of English society. Although incomplete, *The Canterbury Tales* popularized the use of London's vernacular as the literary English, replacing the French and Latin of the Angevin court. Among those tales, "*The Pardoner's Tale*" contains an explicit reference to the plague and to the habit of selling Church indulgences for the forgiveness of sins. Two characters enter the story, the '*pardoner* and the '*summoner*': the first one is an indulgences' seller, while the second is a Church officer who is frighting people with the threat of reporting the sinners to the ecclesiastical court. Both are portrayed as deeply corrupt, greedy, and abusive, as evidenced by a tale in the tale, told by the '*summoner*', where he speaks about three young men, setting out to kill *Death*, responsible for so many deaths of innocent people through the plague. Under a *summoner*'s advice, they encounter in a forest an old man who tells them that they can meet *Death* under an oak tree nearby. When they arrive to that place, they discover a treasure under the tree and decide to wait until nightfall to carry it away. That intricate story comes to an end when they murder one another, in the hope of getting hold of the entire treasure. In spite of the brilliance of Chaucer's narration, it denotes a rather feudal mentality by the author, according to which virtue is part of the baggage of nobility, while greed and malice characterize the lower classes (Bahr, 2018).

## PLAGUE AND LITERATURE DURING THE 'ENGLISH RENAISSANCE'

The plague of 1563 was the second pandemia that hit the the country: it was followed by the epidemics of 1593, 1603, 1625 and 1665. John Stow (1524/25-1605) was one of the best testimonies of that age: '*indefatigable in the trouble he took, thorough and conscientious, accurate – above all things devoted to truth*', from 1565 onwards he published "*The Chronicles of England*", and the "*The Annales of England*, followed in 1598 by "*A Survey of London*" (Rowse, 1971). According to Stow's reports, during the plague's outbreaks the city of London was a dreary, filthy, and a fearful place to live. During the outbreak of the plague in 1592-93, the Crown ordered the complete closure of all theaters in London, and that happened also in all the following epidemics. '*Of course, our ancestors considered that the plague was God's punishment for their sins, provoked by the popular entertainment of the day, the drama. "The cause of plagues is sinne," thundered one clergyman, "if you look to it well, and the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes"'* (Mabillard, 2000).

### William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children. Between 1582 and 1585 he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part-owner of a theater company, *Lord Chamberlain's Men* (later known as the *King's Men*). The plague affected him personally: although there are no records of Shakespeare himself ever being infected, it is largely speculated that his siblings Joan and Margaret (infants), and Anne (aged 7) all died due to the plague; his eleven-year-old son, Hamnet, also died because of the bubonic plague (Potter, 2012). *'The world that Shakespeare lived in because of the plague, full of anxiety, fear, tragedy, and death, allows people to better understand his works…*' (Mabillard, 2000).

Shakespeare did not explicitly mention the London's plague in his literary works, but in several of his plays, in-cluding "Romeo and Juliet" (1591/95), "*Midsummer Night Dream*" (1595/96), *"Twelfth Night*" (1601/02), "*Othello*" (1603), "*Timon of Athens* (1605/06), "*King Lear*" (1605/06), "*Machbeth*" (1606), "*The Tempest*" (1610/11), the pestilence was mentioned. The first of Shakespeare's works mention-ing the plague is the play "*Romeo and Juliet"*. Romeo (be-longing to the Montague family) and Juliet (of the Capulet family) love each other and they marry secretly in Brother Lawrence's convent, against the will of Juliet's father, due to the enmity existing between their families. Soon after their marriage, Romeo is forced to abandon Verona after having unwillingly killed a member of the Capulet family, and flees to the neighboring city of Mantua, out of Verona's jurisdiction, while Juliet's father, ignorant of her daughter's marriage, forces her to accept as her husband another of her suitors. To make the repetition of a wedding impossi-ble, Brother Lawrence suggests to Juliet to drink, during the night preceding the wedding ceremony, a powerful sleeping beverage, in order to make her appear dead. Another monk, Brother John, should go to Mantua with a letter for Romeo, informing him of the plot and asking him to return immediately to Verona to rescue his wife. Unfortunately, in Verona reigns the plague and Brother John is obligated, because of the lockdown, to stay confined in the house of a sick person which he was taking care of. Because of that he cannot run to Mantua to deliver the letter to Romeo. At the height of bad luck, when Juliet is found dead and her body is brought to the convent's crypt and a servant of Romeo, ignorant of the plot, erroneously informs him of the death of Juliet. Romeo runs immediately to Verona, secretly enters the crypt where Juliet's body is kept, sees the dead body of his beloved spouse and kills himself. Shortly after that, Juliet wakes up, sees the dead body of her beloved husband and, in turn, com-mits suicide.

If Brother John had not been confined in a house that was suspected of harboring the plague, the all important letter would have reached Romeo, who would have rescued his beloved

Juliet. It is a tragic comedy of misunderstandings, where the plague plays the role of mastermind! To better understand Shakespeare's disillusioned attitude toward this '*star-crossed*' love story, we should recall how tragically the plague affected him and his family. The following verses from "*Macbeth*" (Act V, Scene 5, 24-28) disclose to us his deep pessimism:

*' Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player*
*that struts and frets his hour upon the stage*
*and then is heard no more: it is a tale*
*told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,*
*signifying nothing*'

In another play, "*King Lear*" (Act II, Scene IV, 242-247), a reminiscence of the symptoms of the plague can be found, when the king addresses himself to his daughter Goneril:

*But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;*
*or rather a disease that's in my flesh,*
*which I must need call mine: thou art a boil,*
*a plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,*
*in my corrupted blood.*

**Ben Jonson**

Benjamin Jonson (1572-1637), a successful author of satirical plays (among which "*Volpone or The Fox*") and of lyrics and epigrams, exerted a great cultural influence upon his fellow writers. The plague that hit London with unusual force in 1610 inspired Jonson to write the comedy "*The Alchemist,*" where he satirizes the greed, vanity and gullibility of citizens of all social classes in the presence of such epidemics. As during previous pestilences, an exodus of wealthy people began from the city to the country, leaving the less fortunate in the grip of *the poors' plague*. The owners of the palaces delegated household authority to their servants, who '*shared the city with quack doctors who sold unicorn's horn and patent nostrums, guaranteed to cure the disease. The city took on a macabre carnival atmosphere of license, at least for those who were still healthy.*' And so on. (Dutton, 2014).

## DANIEL DEFOE AND THE 'GREAT PLAGUE' OF 1665

Daniel Defoe, born in London as Daniel Foe in 1660, was an English writer, pamphleteer and businessman. He published the novel "*Robinson Crusoe*" (1719), which brought him notoriety, at home and abroad. In 1722 Defoe wrote the novel entitled "*A Journal of the Plague Year",* a sort of daily report on the *Great London Plague* (Defoe, 1995). The "*Great Plague*" had ravaged London from Spring till September 1665, killing about 100,000 people, but finally the *Great Fire of London* occurred, which destroyed most of the rats and fleas that carried the bacteria. The historical sources of Defoe's *Journal*, not cited by him, were original documents of the time, saved in the "Burney Collection and Manuscript Room" of the British Museum, as illustrated by the historian of the British Drama and Stage, Watson Nicholson in his essay "*The Historical Sources of Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year: Illustrated by Extracts From the Original Documents in the Burney Collection and Manuscript Room in the British Museum*". Nicholson writes:

'*Throughout my quest among the documents of the years 1664 and 1665, I was again and again impressed with numerous striking resemblances between contemporaneous details of the Great Plague and Defoe 's account in his Journal of the Plague Year*' (Nicholson, 1919).

The style of Defoe's narrative is rather detached at the beginning, when only rumors from abroad reached the citizen, but it acquires dramatic tones with the sudden spreading of the plague. The entire report is very detailed and extremely informative, even if poor in literary qualities. Defoe denotes a great human participation in the fate of his fellow citizens in the time of the plague. His incipit:

*'It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I, among the rest of my neighbors, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, whether, they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant, among some goods which were brought home by their Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia; others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came; but all agreed it was come into Holland again.*

*Such information was gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth.*'

The rumors died off till late autumn. Things changed dramatically when the plague hit England:

'*London might well be said to be all in tears; the mourners did not go about the streets indeed, for nobody put on black or made a formal dress of mourning for their nearest friends; but the voice of mourners was truly heard in the streets. The shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors of their houses, where their dearest relations were perhaps dying, or just dead, were so frequent to be heard as we passed the streets, that it was enough to pierce the stoutest heart in the world to hear them. Tears and lamentations were seen almost in every house, especially in the first part of the visitation; for towards the latter end men's hearts were hardened, and death was so always before their eyes, that they did not so much concern themselves for the loss of their friends, expecting that themselves should be summoned the next hour …*'

Astrological almanacs and self-defined religious books began to circulate, foretelling the ruin of the city, and '*some men, all naked except a pair of drawers about the waist, appeared, crying day and night:* "*Yet forty days, and London shall be destroyed", "Woe to Jerusalem!", "Oh, the great and dreadful God!*"

*'The ministers, to do them justice, and preachers of most sorts that were serious and understanding persons, thundered against these and other wicked practices, and exposed the folly as well as the wickedness of them together, and the most sober and judicious people despised and abhorred them. But it was impossible to make any impression upon the meddling people and the working labouring poor. Their fears were predominant over all their passions, and they threw away their money in a most distracted manner upon those whimsies.*'

With the spreading of the plague, the city magistrates began to take into serious consideration the condition of the people:

*'First, it is thought requisite, and so ordered, that in every parish there be one, two, or more persons of good sort and credit chosen and appointed by the alderman, his deputy, and common council of every ward, by the name of "examiners"... to inquire and learn from time to time what houses in every parish be visited, and what persons be sick, and of what diseases, as near as they can inform themselves; and upon doubt in that case, to command restraint of access until it appear what the disease shall prove. And if they find any person sick of the infection, to give order to the constable that the house be shut up; and if the constable shall be found remiss or negligent, to give present notice thereof to the alderman of the ward... To every infected house there be appointed two watchmen, one for every day, and the other for the night; these watchmen have a special care that no person go in or out of such infected houses whereof they have the charge, upon pain of severe punishment... As soon as any man shall be found by this examiner, chirurgeon, or searcher to be sick of the plague, he shall the same night be sequestered in the same house; and in case he be so sequestered, then though he afterwards die not, the house wherein he sickened should be shut up for a month, after the use of the due preservatives taken by the rest... All public feasting, and particularly by the companies of this city, and dinners at taverns, ale-houses, and other places of common entertainment, be forborne till further order and allowance; and that the money thereby spared be preserved and employed for the benefit and relief of the poor visited with the infection.*'

The narration goes forth, telling the traverses of three Londoners from the lower classes, trying to escape from the plague moving Northeast, without having a country residence. They walk along paths away from the main communication routes, with the load of their poor means of subsistence, badly received by the inhabitants of the various villages they approached, with a few exceptions offered by people of good heart who help them, pitying their precarious conditions of life.

## FROM 'MODERNISM' TO 'ENGAGEMENT'

### Thomas S. Eliot

In the early quarter of the 20th century, in the middle of enormous scientific and technological progress, mankind unexpectedly faced two disastrous events, which disseminated death and desolation in vast parts of Europe. They were the '*Great War*', which lasted from August 1914 till November 1918, with a death toll of about 20 million people, and the devastating viral pandemic of '*H1N1 Flu*', better known as the "*Spanish influenza*", which occurred toward the end of 1917 and lasted until 1919. About 500 million people, one-third of world's population, became infected with it and about 50 million died of it worldwide (2.64 million of them in Europe) (Britannica, 2021).

One of the fathers of the cultural movement of Modernism, the American, later naturalized British poet Thomas. S. Eliot (1888-1965), then living in London, caught the virus in December 1918. Eliot's disease was comparatively mild, but it left him '*so very weak afterwards*.' His wife Vivien also caught the virus. Eliot wrote that '*it affected her nerves so that she can hardly sleep at all.*' The events changed public life, closing schools, churches, and business and filling the hospitals. Then Eliot, under the influence of the desolation sown throughout Europe by the war and the pandemic, composed its memorable poem "*The Waste Land*" (published in 1922), whose starting verses are:

*April is the cruelest month, breeding*
*Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing*
*Memory and desire, stirring*
*Dull roots with spring rain.*
*Winter kept us warm, covering*
*Earth in forgetful snow, feeding*
*A little life with dried tubers...*

The title of the work is highly significant. The '*waste-land*' was at the same time the '*terre gaste*' (*devastated land*) of medieval epics, that is, a sterile and deadly territory that the knights had to cross to reach the '*Grail*' (the cup containing Jesus' blood) and the Western civilization, marked by crisis and sterility, perhaps at the end of its path. The *waste-land* was also London, the city where Eliot resided, and in which he set some scenes of the poem (Austin, 2020). The Indian scholar Sanjna Plawat in her recent essay "*April is the Cruelest Month: A Philosophical Inquiry into Humanity during the Corona Pandemic through T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*" (Plawat, 2020) wrote the following:

*'Every pandemic is a trial of humanity in disguise. The challenges that these harsh times put in the face of civilization make the populace wonder about the fickleness of the material pleasures and the value of the existence itself. History repeats itself in various forms be it a war or contagion. The First World War and influenza virus affected human life at social, economic, and existential levels and thus, left an indelible imprint on the minds of the population, an agony that is captured by T. S. Eliot in his modern poem'*

### Albert Camus

Things got even worse some years later. The Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and, in September 1939, the onset of the Second World War, with a death toll of around 50 million people, seemed to deliver the final blow to human civilization. The French writer Albert Camus (1913-1960), who in his previous works (the novel '*The Stranger*", the essay "*The Myth of Sysiphus*" ans the play "*Caligula*") had introduced his '*philosophy of the absurd*', symbolized the onset of the war with the onset and spreading of a plague in his philosophical novel "*La Peste*" (*The Plague*), which he published in 1947 In this work he rebelled against the '*absurd*': even if evil and pain cannot be explained theoretically, they must be faced with the ethics of individual sincerity and collective commitment, the '*engagement*'. In 1957 Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and in 1958 he published a third novel "*The Fall (La Chute)*", where he examined the biblical theme of '*guilt*'. In 1960 he died in a car accident.

The novel "*The Plague*", has a choral nature, where the narrator tells in the third person, in a clear and bare style, the onset and the spreading of the plague in Oran, '*a city without*

*pigeons, without trees and without gardens, where you can meet neither the flapping of wings nor the rustle of leaves.*' The main characters of the novel are the following:

- Doctor Bernard Rieux, indefatigable in treating the victims of the plague, a symbol of the *ethics of commitment*. He outlines an anti-heroic figure, as Rieux declares that '*it is not about heroism but honesty*'. His wife, who had been ill for some time, had left for a mountain resort shortly before the outbreak of the epidemic and his mother came to her son to take care of the house during the absence of his wife;
- Jean Tarrou, '*a still young man, stout, with a massive and hollow face, on which two thick eyebrows stood out*', who settled in the city of Oran shortly before the epidemic began. Nobody knows his past; he appears good-natured, smiling, a connoisseur of all human weaknesses. He organizes rescue teams to come to the aid of the sick, cooperating with Doctor Tarrou without fear of getting infected; at the same time he writes a chronicle of the events;
- Rambert, a young and impetuous journalist, who had landed in Oran to carry out a journalistic inquiry into the city and remained imprisoned there, owing to the lockdown. He is eager to find his beloved woman but, in the meantime, he cooperates in managing rescue teams for the plague victims. After having almost succeeded in organizing an escape to reach his wife, at the last moment renounces to it, to choose a common destiny with Doctor Rieux and Tarrou.

The work is subdivided into five sections, where the author marks subsequent stages of the spreading of the disease and the effects on the inhabitants of its evolution. It is worth mentioning another character who enters the narration, priest Paneloux, who at the onset of the plague had urged his fellow citizens to repent of their sins, seeing divine punishment in the plague. Now, after having himself participated in the rescue teams and having seen death with his own eyes taking over innocent young lives, the tone of his sermons changes. He invites people not to listen to the moralists who exhorted them to get down on their knees and abandon everything. On the contrary, they are exhorted '*to start walking, in the darkness, a little blindly, to try to do good, without seeking personal salvation.…God's love is a difficult love. It asks for the total abandonment of oneself and the contempt of one's person. But he is the only one who can erase the suffering and death of children*'.

Toward the end of the novel a proper vaccine against that type of infectious disease is finally developed in town and the disease slows the momentum of its race, even though people continue to get infected and many of them, like Tarrou, succumb to it.

This is Camus' final warning to his readers:

"*I know for sure that each of us carries it within us, the plague, because no one in the world is immune from it. And that it is necessary to pay the utmost attention so as not to risk, in a moment of distraction, to breathe in the face of another and to pass the infection. The only natural thing is the microbe. The rest, health, integrity, purity, in a certain sense is the fruit of the will, and of a will that must never fail. The right man, the one who infects almost no one, is the one who gets distracted as little as possible. And it takes a lot of willpower and tension to never get distracted. I just say that there are plagues and victims on earth and that, as far as possible, we must refuse to be on the side of the scourge. For this I have decided to stand on the side of the victims. Among them I can at least look for how to reach the third category, that is, peace*."

## CONCLUSIONS

Literature gives us wings to fly through space and time, allowing us to look from above on vast unknown territories and to descend to see at close range new places, discovering the customs and traditions of their inhabitants, even learning to know their secret feelings. On the other hand, literature gives a somehow distorted mirror of society, as it happens in painting: an artwork emphasizes certain events and overshadows or neglects certain others, depending on sensibility and sharpness of gaze of the author. When Giovanni Boccaccio wrote his work, in the fourteenth century, he was imbued with the new ideas of Humanism, learned from Francesco Petrarca: those ideas transmitted to him trust in the future, despite the desolation created by the plague. He described the suffering of common people during the pestilence, balancing dramatic images with the joyful representation of a group of young people, self-secluded in a villa in the outskirts of the city, prefiguring the advent of a better world through art and literature. Chaucer, on the contrary, was still prisoner of the medieval ideas of social order, dominant in the French-English kingdom of the Angevins: in "*The Pardoner's Tale*" depicted commoners as bad people, full of greed, ignorant of the ethical principles of higher classes.

The English literary landscape in the 17th century is diversified: great artists like Shakespeare avoided any realistic representation of the plague, but its dramatic effects on his family fueled the pessimism of the great writer. The same pessimism nourished the sarcasm of Ben Jonson, as evidenced by his play "*The Alchemist*", which offered a grotesque image of the chaos induced by the plague on London's society

Completely heedless of the literary value of his "*A Journal of the Plague Year*", Daniel Defoe presented in the eighteenth century an in-depth analysis of the social effects of the plague. What is striking in his '*journalistic report*' is his illustration of the sense of self-isolation of the people, the fear of the foreigners induced in the inhabitants of the villages by the plague, the erection of a real or a symbolic wall against '*the other*', which spread like a cancer among the less culturally evolved part of the society. Two centuries later, Thomas S. Eliot, writing "*The Waste Land*", knew how to combine in his verses the sense of horror for the death and desolation induced in him by two pestilences, the '*Great War*' and the '*Spanish Flu*', with his love for classical reminiscences, offered to him by his youth studies in Harvard. The effect was powerful.

What to say about Albert Camus' "*The Plague*"? His novel offers to us, together with a masterful use of the words,

the most complete analysis of the ethical implications linked to the occurrence of present and future disasters, stimulating on us the desire for a 'spiritual rebirth', as a lesson to be grasped after the occurrence of these disasters. As a conclusion, the author of the present paper hopes that the literary works taken into consideration will offer to their readers a relief from their state of psychological disarray caused by the pandemics.

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