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READING LITERATURE IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE MARQUE OF RED DEATH*

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Abstract: This paper contextualizes the role of literature during the current state of Covid-19 outbreak. As representation of plague has been a staple in literature across time and space, reading literature about pandemic offers important insights in dealing with the changing period. This study offers a reading of 'The Marque of Red Death', a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe which dramatizes the outbreak of titular plague. Poe's narration contextualizes the horrifying aspects of plague and also criticizes the social inequality concerning the ability of different social classes to cope with pandemic. Hence, this depiction asserts that ecological problem is inseparable with social problem and racial inequality. This study is conducted under ecocritical framework which emphasizes the reorientation of human and non-human relationship through the imaginary literature. The findings suggest that the non-human entity in form of plague is depicted as a disruptive force that abolish the progress of human civilization. This dramatization explores humanity to ponder their position in the world as a reminder of their mortality. The analysis suggests that during the troubled era of Covid-19 outbreak, reading representation of plague in literature can provide an idea with how people across time and space cope with pandemic outbreak.

Keywords: *ecocriticism, Edgar Allan Poe, plague in literature,*

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been dominating news headlines throughout the year. The disease, which resulted in acute respiratory syndrome, originated in Wuhan, China and rapidly spread all over the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized the worldwide threat of Covid-19 by declaring it a global pandemic with a declaration on March 11, 2020 (Sheng, 2020). Even with the recognition and the implementation of quarantine and lockdown, the spread of Covid-19 remains uncontrolled, in which nations such as the United States, India, Brazil and Russia have borne the majority of the confirmed cases. As this article is being written, currently there is no scientifically proven coronavirus which will prevent the incubation of Covid-19 virus. The world is entering the era of new normality, which is characterized by the implementation of social and physical

distancing at least until total immunization of the virus is possible. Sneader & Singhal (2020) conceptualizes the schism between pre-and post-Covid 19 outbreak as follows,

It is increasingly clear our era will be defined by a fundamental schism: the period before COVID-19 and the new normal that will emerge in the post-viral era: the “next normal.” In this unprecedented new reality, we will witness a dramatic restructuring of the economic and social order in which business and society have traditionally operated. (Sneader & Singhal, 2020, p. 3)

Within turbulent period of New Normality, literature offers important insight in conceptualizing how to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. As contextualized by Gemilang, “we can understand the history of certain time by reading literature, understanding the experience of certain people without directly experiencing it.” (2020, p. 55). Representation of pandemic, plague, and other forms of epidemic illness has been a recurring trope of fictional literary work across time and space. Literature implores us to understand how people in the past have fought against the trauma of plague in the bygone past, and to reconceptualize the status of humanities under the rapidly changing world due to disease outbreaks. As diseases are a recurring phenomenon across centuries, the representation of pandemic outbreak has been a staple theme in literature (Christ, David, Lewalski, Lipking, & Logan, 2006, pp. 55–60). The seminal work of Western literature, the Bible underlines the impact of ten plagues that strikes the Egyptians during the period of Exodus. Besides the biblical plagues, the Black Death of Middle Ages Europe as a result of bubonic plague, the devastation brought by European settlers in the New World also became recurring themes in literary fictions (Cooke, 2009; Crawford, 2004; Palma, 2016). Up into the contemporary period, the emergence of Ebola virus as it is narrated by Richard Preston in 1994 underlies the recurrence of portraying disease in fictions. Even in the 1800’s period in America, the representation of plague is also a well-known topic to explore, as seen in the prominence in Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction.

A prolific author of his age, Edgar Allan Poe and his fictional works are contextualized in this section. Born at Boston on January 19th, 1809, Poe was an American author who was also noteworthy for his works as editors and literary critics. He wrote a substantial amount of literature, mainly focusing on short stories and poetry.

One of his much-talked about poem, *the Raven* (1845) is noteworthy due to its use of the bird Raven to represent evil and death, which is also employed as a symbolism for the narrator's grief of losing his beloved. His genre of writing focused on mystery, gothic, and thriller which positioned himself as the pioneer of detective fiction genre. Furthermore, Poe managed to transform the genre of horror story through detailed comprehension of psychological depth experienced by the characters. His writings are characterized by its flirtation with death, grotesque characters, and tragic endings (Crow, 2003). It is argued that the reasoning behind Poe's tendency to write macabre stories is closely linked with his psychological condition. It is believed that Poe suffered from bipolar depression which continuously caused his psyche to be gloomy and melancholy (Walker, 1986).

The present study focuses on analyzing "The Masque of the Red Death", a short story by Poe to underline representation of plague outbreak which is conducted through ecocritical perspective. Poe positions his narration under the outbreak of the titular disease, and explore the inequality based on the social and class divide concerning the ability to cope with the disease. His story conceptualizes how the upper-class nobility abandons the villagers to their fate and hides in a luxurious abbey, only to later visit by Death that takes their lives. In the end, Poe's narration foregrounds the inevitability of death through the death of all characters in the story. This study employs ecocriticism as the framework to mainly focus on the representation of non-human entities in form of diseases, arguing against disparities of epidemic treatment between the rich and the poor, and contemplating the inevitability of death. The study concludes that Poe's short story contextualizes the non-human entity as something horrifying and dreadful for the readers to ponder the position of human and non-human relationship.

Poe's usage of symbolism, such as contrasting between his fictionalized 'Red Death' and the bubonic plague of 'Black Death' in the Middle Ages contrasts his writing with other representations of plague in literature. Moreover, the setting of Poe's story is an unnamed countryside instead of a real location in the world, and that also differentiates his stories with other accounts. The Representation of plague, in form of SARS outbreak in China becomes the central account of *Such is the World*, a novel written in 2006 by Hu Fayun and translated into English in 2011 that focuses on how Fayun criticizes the totalitarianism of Chinese government with the repression of social

rights during the outbreak. Different from Fayun's critique toward Chinese government, as Poe positions his story in an unnamed country, so that his story is more universal in outlook. The dramatization of social divide between the upper and lower class and their differing ability cope with the societal upheaval due to the pandemic is a universal theme which occurs even until the contemporary period.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ecocriticism is a literary criticism which focuses on analyzing the representation of the non-human world in fictional works. The premise of ecocriticism is the realization that scholars of the humanities can no longer ignore the current state of environmental problem, especially as humanities themselves are the ones to blame for the years of exploitation. Under the belief of the interconnection between human culture and the physical world through a two-fold relationship, both affecting and affected by it, ecocriticism explores the "intersection between nature and culture which is presented through the works of literature and language" (Glottfelty, 1996, p. xi). It is believed that imaginary and fictional world conceptualized through literature has the potential to shape the real world through the changing of paradigm between human and the non-human (Marland, 2013). Ecocriticism argues that environmental crisis cannot be separated with crisis of the imagination, which indicates a necessity for other forms of representing nature instead of the human-oriented paradigm. As the relationship highly favors the humans through anthropocentric point of view that designates non-human as commodity to be exploited, ecocriticism mediates the relationship between human and non-human through alternative point of view (Indriyanto, 2020, p. 3).

Under the ecocritical lens, the representation of deadly epidemic that ravages human civilization is intended to reconceptualize human and non-human relationship. By placing humanity in a helpless position under the uncontrollable disasters, this depiction encourages the reader to question his position in the world. Several articles have explored how the depiction of plague in fictional literary works is intended to convey a sense of dreadful condition to contemplate human and non-human relationship. Rolfe's article, entitled *Fatal and Memorable: Plague, Providence and War in English Texts: 1625-6* connects the outbreak of plague and pestilence with God's judgement of sinful England. She argues that the representation of plague as a

memorialization to relate and renew one's duties into their community, God and their surroundings (2020, p. 308). Similarly, Whitney on "Dekker and Middleton's Plague Pamphlets as Environmental Literature" (2011) implores depiction of plague as an example of 'environmental catastrophe.' She mentions how the plague comes into being due to the destruction of natural habitats and evokes human's responsibility to maintain the balance of the natural world, the cycle of nature, and the inevitability of death. In her words,

The existence of plague pamphlets features moral and social critique of exploitation, and revelations of emotional suffering and moral malaise. They attack social inequality, define the human as part of nature, and seek remedy in recognition of the relationship. In surprisingly encouraging tones Speth also offers comprehensive and ethically laden prescriptions for sustainable and more fulfilling societies in harmony with nature. (Whitney, 2011, p. 217)

METHOD

This study is a qualitative research in which the primary source of data is "The Masque of Red Death", a short story written by an American author, Edgar Allan Poe. Qualitative research focuses on individual or group problem which is in line with the emphasis of this study which is to explore the representation of pandemic. (Creswell, 2009, p. 63). In order to analyze the problem, this article is conducted under the descriptive-qualitative approach which emphasizes interpretation from the quotation taken from the stories. The data is gathered by collecting passages from the texts which are then analysed based on the ecocritical framework to reconceptualize the status of the non-human. The arguments are presented through three main aspects, underlying how the plague in the aforementioned short story is represented, arguing for the existence of social division in dealing with plague, and lastly conveying how the story underlines the inevitability of death as an avenue to reorient human and non-human relationship.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

"The Masque of Red Death" tells a story of a deadly plague that strikes the unnamed country. The protagonist, Prince Prospero is a wealthy ruler who abandons his

country during the pandemic and retreats into an isolated enclave. While thousands of commoners died outside his palace walls, Prospero remains unconcerned with the plight of his citizens. To distract from the macabre situation of the epidemic outbreak outside his castle, Prospero holds a lavish party with thousands of his friends in attendance. The extravagant masquerade party runs smoothly until in the midnight suddenly a mysterious person appears. As all guests in the party are wearing masks, nobody has any idea who the mysterious person is. It is later revealed that the stranger is the personification of Death itself, which carries upon his person the epidemic of Red Death. One by one all the participants of the party dropped dead, including Prince Prospero and his fellow entourage.

In the first part of the analysis, this study explores how the representation of plague, in the form of titular Red Death is presented by Poe as the author. The story begins *in media res* in which the plague already happens and strikes the unaware populace of the unnamed country. Poe vividly captures the desolate brought by plague which is considered the most fatal and the most hideous disease ever known. The destruction caused by the plague, which has undergone for some periods, is presented through the following excerpt

“The Red Death had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.”
(Poe, 1842, p. 2)

Horrible nature of plague is a picturesque depicted through the words of Poe's narration. The prior excerpt underlies the temporality of the story, an interesting aspect is how Poe contrasted between the short time range for an infection to occur until the termination of the disease 'half an hour' and the long time the plague devastated the country. Poe invites the readers to reflect on the looming threat of pandemic and diseases, especially the horrific condition experienced by the infected. Under the belief that the disease is contagious, the infected are ostracized from the society and are denied. This marks a demarcation between the sick and the living, which is employed through Poe's usage of binary opposition.

Another noteworthy information is the naming of the plague, in which the Poe employs the term Red Death. Red Death, the plague name which is associated with Blood as the avatar lies in stark contrast with the commonly used tropes of 'Black Death' to recall the deadly bubonic plague in Medieval Europe. Although the ideas of 'Black Death' as apocalyptic plague remains the defining theme of the story, Poe links the notion of death with the motif of life through the symbolism of blood. As elaborated by Harpham, the color red is often linked with plague ever since the Biblical times of the Egyptian plague (1982, p. 112). The color red also evokes a sense of dread which is caused by the depiction of horrifying bleeding of the pores of those infected.

As mentioned previously, the notion of binary opposition between two contrasting themes plays a pivotal role in Poe's narration. The juxtaposition of life and dead, through the symbolism of blood and dead bodies is further explored through the structural opposition of inside and outside, healthy and sick. The demarcation between the sick and the survivor, which is represented by the existence of a fortified compound to house the nobility articulates the social divide of society. As will be further explored in subsequent sections, the action of Prince Prospero highlights the differing ability to cope during the time of pandemic between the plague-stricken citizens on the outside and the nobility on the inside. This situation conveys a critique towards inequality based on social and class divide.

The narration illustrates the contrasting situation based on social status in dealing with the plague. While the Prince and his entourage are able to reside in a luxurious compound with easy access to amenities and even decadence, the citizens rapidly reside by the disastrous plague. The contrast between the wealthy and the poor is highlighted through the following excerpt,

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress nor egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within." (Poe, 1842, p. 3)

The prior excerpt can be read as a criticism towards the capitalistic and materialistic emphasis of happiness which is built upon the plights of local peasants. As articulated by Zapf, Poe's short story functions as an allegory of a hedonistic society

which is contrasted by the poverty-ridden world in the outside (2016, p. 144). The dramatization of medieval society which is divided among social lines is further highlighted during the time of pandemic. As explored in the prior passages, there lies a stark divide between the world inside the castle and outside the castle. The division become a struggle to survival, as only the wealthy have the ability to treat illness compared to the less well-off peasants. It can be stated that the Poe's narration dramatizes the existence of social divide based on the accumulation of capital and the differing ability of each group to cope under the wide pandemic. Another passage of the story illustrates how the fortified upper class remains able to live in decadence, unconcerned by the epidemic outbreak outside the castle.

“It was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade.” (Poe, 1842, p. 3)

As literature is a mirror of reality, the dramatization of ‘Red Death’ in Poe’s fiction evokes the present state of Covid-19 pandemic. The situation experienced by the minorities in the United States and the lackluster reception of the local authorities can be stated to resemble the fictionalized depiction of plague in Poe’s short story. While Poe’s imaginative depiction focuses on class division instead of racial lines, the condition in present-day American society underlies the connection between racial disparities and the ability to cope with pandemic. Several articles have explored how the differing social-economic status between the ethnically minorities and the Whites result in contrasting number of accumulated Covid-19 cases in the United States. Beyer (2020) argues that Covid-19 outbreak in America mainly happens with the poor and the working poor, especially the African-American community. His finding suggests that “The Blacks are far more likely to contract the illness, more likely to be hospitalized and more likely to die from it... The coronavirus has helped expose the effect of deep economic inequality in the United States” (2020, p. 13). His line of thought is echoed by another study from Doumas et al (2020) that charts the increasing mortality rate of African-American ethnicity due to Covid-19. Their study concludes that the higher mortality rate is caused by several underlying mechanism behind racial disparities, which are inequalities in health care access and socioeconomic factors (Doumas et al., 2020, p. 1). Based on the several examples of the relation between racial disparities and

inequalities of health care in America, it can be stated that Poe's fictional representation of 'Red Death' foreshadows the happening of Covid-19 outbreak more than one and half-centuries after this short story was published. Furthermore, the situation in present day America in which the inequality is also based on racial parentage further problematizes the contexts of social divide in Poe's fictional story.

Lastly, this paper argues that Poe's short story encourages the reader to contemplate the inevitability of death, which in turn results in the necessity of refiguring the position of human in a wider ecology. Morton (2010) through his concept of 'dark ecology' criticizes the usual romanticization of nature as something pure, unspoiled and beautiful by instead emphasizing that nature can be horrifying and ultimately untamed by humanity. In Morton's idea, what he coins as 'dark ecology' is "the ecological awareness which is dark-depressing, the ecological though which includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror" (2016, p. 10). Although humanity might attempt to control and manipulate nature, in the end nature is something which always exists and is eternal while humanity in the end is only mortal and will die in the end. This is echoed by the ending of Poe's narration in which no one survived, not even the Prince and his royal entourage. In short, the short story written by Poe dramatizes what is considered as *memento mori*— a symbolic reminder of the inevitability of death.

Reading of Poe's narration from ecocritical perspective highlights nature as a disruptive force. The representation of non-human elements in the story, instead of positive energy which invigorates and rejuvenates the characters, this narration is marred with entropic imagination instead. Entropic imagination, as defined by Zapf is a dynamic that transform all entry of energy within a closed system which increases disorder instead of order (2016, p. 221). In other word, while energy inside a closed system will always be in a same state, whenever an unknown material is introduced, the system will inevitability leads into disorder and collapse. The plague symbolizes the entrance of disorder that ultimately collapsed human civilization and killed its population. Hence, Poe's narration aligns with the concept of 'dark ecology' that portrays nature as something hurrying and uncontrollable. The climax contextualizes the victory of death which hold the dominion over all entities, or in other words reduces everything into the primordial aspect. It can be seen in the subsequent passage:

“And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.” (Poe, 1842, p. 4)

Based on the representation of plague in ‘The Marque of Red Death’, this paper ponders the role of literature in general during the time of pandemic. Literature has conceptualized how humanity, although separated by time and space, has the ability to cope and overcome plague and illness outbreaks. the Representation of plague allows readers to sympathize and elate with the fictionalized account which eerily resembles the reality. As dramatized by Poe through his ‘Red Death’, plague victims are considered unclean and infectious which lead into their alienation from society. This portrayal highlights social stigma associated with the coronavirus disease in which afflicted patients are treated as outcasts. Lastly, the representation of pandemic also calls for a reorientation of human and non-human relationship, as we are made aware that nature is uncontrollable while we as human will perish in the end.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis, this study concludes that literature, as seen in Poe’s short story offers a way to conceptualize human and non-human relationship through the fictional representation of a plague outbreak. Especially during the current Covid-19 pandemic, the representation of plague in literature contemplates the readers to question their position as human beings under the rapidly changing world. The argument is presented through three main aspects. The first section argues upon the grotesque and horrifying depiction of the Red Death, in which afflicted citizens are denied to survive by the upper class, ruling populace. This argument leads into the existence of social divide based on the binary opposition of inside/outside in which the elite class of society are able to initially survive the pandemic. This situation mirrors the current happening in the U.S. as people of ethnic descends are more afflicted with the impact of Covid-19 instead of the privileged white. Furthermore, stigma associated with plague victims as unclean and contagious also occurs with patients suffering from Covid-19. Lastly, this paper contemplates the morbid representation of the non-human entity as

plague as a symbolism of *memento mori*. Humanity is only mortal and they will perish in the end, while nature is eternal.

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