

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF LETTERS
DEPARTMENT OF UNIVERSAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**THE EPIDEMIC IMAGINARY.
HISTORICAL AND METAPHORICAL
REPRESENTATIONS OF PLAGUE IN
LITERATURE**

SUMMARY

Scientific supervisor :

Prof. Dr. Corin BRAGA

Candidate:

Cristina Simona VIDRUȚIU

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2. KEYWORDS:

plague; history; literature; medicine; politics; epidemic; miasma; contagion; quarantine; pest house; black; mentalities; imaginary; Boccaccio; Manzoni; Defoe; Camus; Ionesco; Saramago.

3. SUMMARY:

Our paper is built upon a five-part structure. In the first one, called *Introduction*, we present a series of necessary details which restrain the work area within. The initial premises is that the 20th and 21st centuries show a certain fascination for epidemical phenomenon and thus, the epidemic-related discourses define this period of time. The research itself is based upon the attempt of decoding the pattern (or of some of the immutable points of reference) of plague representations and the analysis of its dynamics and functions within literary depictions. To achieve these goals we start by defining the work area (which is to be found among “Medical humanities”, “Medical anthropology”, “Cultural epidemiology” and a new area which we will call “Epidemic imaginary”), then we define the corpus of texts to be used for the analysis, we state the objectives and the innovative aspects, perceive the limits and decide the structure altogether with the indispensable paths to follow.

As for the second part of the thesis, called *Representations of plague in literature. The epidemic pattern. The epidemic imaginary*, we do a critical history of the studies dedicated to the representation of the plague in literature from the standpoint of five essential aspects: the relationship between the plague representations in literature and

the the plague representations in other areas; the relationship between the specific representations of the plague in literature and the historical context; the definition of “a plague literature” and of a canon of this one; the features of the “plague literature”; the functions of the “plague literature”.

Interwoven with this complex field of criticism, our approach defines two new basic tools in studying the representations of plague in literature: in the first place “the pattern of plague representations” and in the second place “the epidemic imaginary”.

We define the pattern of plague representations as the core of all plague representations or, rephrasing it, the representations of the plague are the consequence of the development of a core-structure based on the cultural and scientific background, thus making the result to have a contextual signification and function. The pattern of the plague representations in literature is not, by any means, an immobile structure which can be utterly identified throughout history but, on the contrary, it is a summing up of reiterating motifs, immutable reference points, which, according to the medium of insertion and the foreseen function may give certain variants of representation. The pattern of the plague representations is structured according to six pillars concerning medical aspects: epidemics, miasma, contagiousness, quarantine, pest house and black. To a further understanding of the cultural heritage of the used concepts in depicting this pattern in literature we draw a short chronology of the above mentioned in a study of mentalities.

We define the epidemic imaginary from a double perspective: first, as a sum of the epidemic representations, secondly as an area ruled by a dynamic of representations very similar to the plague itself (reiteration, violence and persistence which altogether have the capacity to duplicate themselves in other areas of research). For a better understanding of the concept of epidemic imaginary we explore the concepts of disease chronology and epidemic dynamics.

As for the third part of our research, called *The plague - medical and historical profile*, we are looking into the two sides of the illness. On one hand, we try to narrow down the medical identity of the plague from the definition perspective, the etymological perspective, the synonymic paths plague-pest, the triad epizooty- pandemic –endemic, the typology, the symptomatology, the inner mechanism of spreading itself,

the taken measures to stop it and of the treatment. Moreover, we define the actual impact of the plague throughout the perspective of the annual cases, the predisposed zones, the natural reservoirs and of the bio-terrorist peril. On the other hand, we are trying to synthesize the historical profile of the plague as seen from the perspective of the epidemic reiteration both spatial and temporal or as connected to the three major pandemics: The Justinian plague (540-590), *The Black Death* (1346-1361) and the Chinese plague (1855-1900).

In the fourth section of the paper, named *The plague - literary profile*, we are studying a series of literary representation of the plague from a double perspective: both analyzing specific texts and trying to enhance a global view upon the intersections and the parallelisms between the plague literature works and its authors. As for the representations of the plague in literature we differentiate two kinds of texts according to their relationship with the function of the plague in them.

The first type of texts is using a realistic approach, meaning that they illustrate historical epidemics of plague. For this situation we selected the next case studies: *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio presenting the plague in Florence, 1348, *Journal of the Plague Year* and *Two Preparations for the Plague as well for Soul as body* by Daniel Defoe presenting the plague in London, 1665, *The betrothed* and *History of the Column of infamy* by Alessandro Manzoni showing the plague in Milan, 1628-1630.

The second type of texts is using the metaphorical approach, more precisely they refer to political “plagues” of the history. For this situation we selected the next case studies: *The Plague*, *The State of Siege* and *Caligula* by Albert Camus which refer to general existence, Nazism and the horrors of the Second World War, *Rhinoceros* and *Killing Game* by Eugène Ionesco which refer to the Iron Guard, *Blindness* and *Seeing* by Jose Saramago which refer to Franco’s regime.

In the fifth part of the research, called *Conclusions*, we are trying to answer the series of questions formulated in the *Introduction*, questions which on one hand concern the relationship between the historical context, the medical one, the literary one, the biographical context and the veiled intention of the author, and on the other hand concern the role of the literary representations of the plague in the present world (due to an excessive usage of the epidemic pattern to all violent, mysterious, reiterative

phenomenons with a huge impact upon population). The hypothesis we are trying to defend is that there is a temptation to build and propagate epidemic scenarios which can be interpreted as a symptom of a general hypochondriac state specific for the 20th and 21st centuries.

The research ends with a series of *Appendices* illustrating different aspects of the plague discussed in the former chapters and with a *Bibliography* that includes on the one hand the literary sources, and on the other hand the critical works used in the paper.

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