

THE ABSENCE OF PANDEMIC LITERATURE: RE-EXPERIENCING THE PANDEMIC IN KERR'S UNITY (1918) AND IN CONTEMPORARY TIME

Safaa Falah Hasan Alsaranga

Istanbul Gelişim University

Abstract

Modernist literature had a strong potential for representation and embodiment. It vividly conveyed the reality of the two world wars and the views of the individuals who lived through them. However, there remained one missing chain in all of that representation: the pandemic. The impact of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic on humans was greater than that of the two world wars combined. Yet, it was not highlighted by authors back then and was only briefly and indirectly represented due to its invisibility, unlike war. In later times, pandemic writing had slightly flourished and new works directly reflected the pandemic, such as Kevin Kerr's *Unity* (1918). The play seems to mimic our contemporary experience under COVID-19, although it portrays the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. This means that the play shows many similarities and parallels to our life under the pandemic of today, as it demonstrates the similarities between the Spanish flu and COVID-19. This paper reveals part of the causes concealed behind the literary silence of the flu pandemic of 1918. Moreover, it provides a brief comparison between the pandemic in *Unity* (1918) and the pandemic of today asserting the significance of literary representation of these events.

Keywords: Spanish flu, COVID-19, pandemic literature, Kevin Kerr, *Unity* (1918)

Introduction

In the last few decades, the term “pandemic” was not sufficiently expressed by the literary and historical mediums. Instead, “pandemic” remained a classical term that was always associated with the 1918 Spanish flu until the occurrence of the COVID-19 virus and its assessment as a pandemic. When performing research on pandemics, historical archives and historical encyclopedias are consistently the first major sources to be relied upon. However, literature has its own realistic reflection of some major aspects of the 1918 pandemic, nonetheless, that reflection was not thoroughly examined. Modernist writers echoed the pandemic very briefly as their main focus was poured into World War I. The Spanish flu pandemic occurred towards the end of the notorious First World War, at a time in which the public's attention was completely drawn to war and its long-awaited outcome. As a result, no immediate measures were taken against the Spanish flu pandemic upon its spread, which would later record significantly more fatalities than that of the two world wars combined. The main issue back then was the war as it was more urging and demanding than the pandemic. On the one hand, women waited for their recruited husbands while working in military industries. Soldiers, on the other hand, were huddled in bunkers, unaware of the virus' invisible threat. By the same token, in an attempt to mirror their society's reality, writers focused on the war rather than on the pandemic.

From a literary aspect, *Unity* (1918) was one of the earliest works to provide a live and direct demonstration of the pandemic upon its first performance in the late nineties. The play explicitly embodies the struggle and devastation that people underwent during the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. The scenes in the play that demonstrate life under the Spanish flu pandemic are similar to contemporary experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The play would seem uncanny and alien because of its action, but now appears as all too familiar. Kevin Kerr notes that *Unity* (1918)

has been steadily published for 20 years and did not become popular until the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading (K. Kerr, personal communication, August 21, 2021). Kerr's play did not only convey people's life in the 1918 pandemic, but had to do so with all of the restrictions imposed that resemble those of today's pandemic. When combining historical archives with Kerr's play, one can notice that the literary representation in Kerr's play provides a more lively embodiment of the circumstances under the pandemic while history could only preserve events in the form of outlined records. This paper addresses pandemics in a literary context, questioning the reasons behind the literary silence over the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. Furthermore, it draws parallels between the life under the pandemic in *Unity (1918)* and the life under the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting challenges and restrictions.

Pandemic and Literature

Humanity's experience with the Spanish flu pandemic was unforgettable, "as globally, the pandemic killed between 50 and 100 million people, and the United States suffered more deaths in the pandemic than in World War I, World War II, and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined" (Outka, 2019, p. 1). The Spanish flu pandemic started spreading when the public was watching the end of World War I with anticipation, resulting in a total neglect of the invisible malicious enemy. Therefore, it is crucial to question the literary silence over such a catastrophe. Most of the modernist authors had atrocious experiences with the pandemic: D. H. Lawrence and Edvard Munch barely survived, Gustav Klimt died, W. B. Yeats' wife experienced a fatal case, Virginia Woolf had profound concerns about her illness, and T. S. Eliot was afraid of potential brain damage from his case of the Spanish flu (Outka, 2019, p. 1). Then, what could be behind this conspicuous silence and erasure of such a significant event in modernist literature? The tremendous numbers of deaths due to the Spanish flu were not considered as historical in the way war casualties were. The

majority of readers will fail to find pandemic narratives in general and of the 1918 pandemic in particular. This stems from the public, including the modernist writers, who prioritized military conflicts over the microscopic virus, allowing military conflicts to define history while reducing the significance of the pandemic's role. In addition, common traditions viewed deaths from illness "with seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death" (Outka, 2019, p. 2), providing another reason for the absence of pandemic writing. Moreover, illness and war are interpreted differently as they impact humans differently. Outka (2019) contends that the pandemic's effect was certainly sensual and pathological, and its danger was microscopic in the literal meaning. By contrast, the war was visible, easier to observe, and thus easier to take a stance on, it affected both civilians and soldiers with its events and outcomes, it was the males' race for power and strength and thus, literature would make it its focal point. Writers mostly associate their writing with events with considerable importance for others; such events are assumed to be touching human sentiments and having imageries of grief and loss, often present in wars which most of the modernist authors preferred.

Despite the seeming disappearance of a direct reference to the Spanish flu pandemic, its traces can still be noticed within a few major literary works of the modern era. Within the lens of the pandemic, *The Waste Land* and *Mrs. Dalloway* reflect in their modernist metaphors shocking scenes of fragmentation and signs of shrapnel and severe dementia which are qualities shared by both war and the pandemic. Moreover, "invasions become ones of microbes and not only men; postwar ennui reveals a brooding fear of an invisible enemy" (Outka, 2019, p. 3). Writers such as T. S. Eliot and Woolf did not intend to include the pandemic in their writing, but as it existed in their unconsciousness, it eventually transferred itself into their narratives. One of the primary topics highlighted in modernist literature was violence. While the forms of violence could alter, they shared the same fundamentals. In terms of violence, the war and the pandemic are alike as

they both cause severe harm and damage.

Unlike war, a pandemic is very delocalized and has no location or borders limitations, it is not biased towards any country and it consumes the body from within. In her book *At the Violet Hour*, Cole (2014) assures that modernist literature is “profoundly shaped by the call of violence” (pp. 5-6) in both form and theme. She also argues that if the body was violated by a non-sentient external agent (the virus), it will unmistakably corrupt the internal organs of the body and even cause bleeding in some cases (Cole, 2014, pp. 5-6). Modernism’s narratives depicted violence not only as an element of war but also as an abstract idea that covers illness. The picture of the pandemic resides in the indirect qualities of modernism, including violence. On the surface it appears to readers as a chronology of suffering during the war; yet, in its deep interpretation, the elements of the pandemic are apparent to some extent. Therefore, modern literature’s characteristics emerge as subterranean echoes of the pandemic’s horrors and the very ways these horrors go underground as the pandemic has always been “a hidden force that has been there all along, exerting weight and influence” (Outka, 2019, p. 3). The pandemic is not only invisible for people in real life, but it is also invisible in their imagination, as it is literally microscopic.

Experiencing the Pandemic in *Unity (1918)* and in Contemporary Time

As the war and the pandemic’s imminent risks faded and fears of their return receded, authors grew more eager to revive the pandemic: to express its harm directly, explain its significance, and forecast its long-term ramifications. Through his play *Unity (1918)*, Kevin Kerr resembled such authors that embodied the pandemic from numerous aspects. The play chronicles the progress of the Spanish flu pandemic in the Canadian city of Unity, while also exploring the public’s attitudes towards both war and the pandemic. Unity is hit by a mysterious fatal pandemic affecting old and young people, and eventually leads to rapid deaths. At the initial outbreak of the

pandemic, strict measures are enforced and the community is isolated to keep the virus away, as social distancing becomes a must. Moreover, the people of Unity become paranoid and residents turn on each other trying to find a scapegoat for the problem.

In *Unity (1918)*, although the proposed “enemy” is not fully present in Unity until the second act, Kerr places some signs that predict a coming disaster. In the prologue’s opening, there is a sound of a threshing machine described as a “distant horrible roar” (p. 11) dominating the atmosphere. When considering the historical context of the year 1918, this puzzling and enigmatic sound takes on a dual meaning: first as a reference to the mechanized First World War and second as foreshadowing of the upcoming virus.

As explained before, people back home were in a state of anticipation about the war as they waited for soldiers to come home from the battlefield. This is reflected earlier in the play before the arrival of the virus to Unity when Bea, a young civilian woman who has always been curious about the soldiers’ circumstances in the trenches, is stunned by what she has been told by a returning soldier:

Bea: (aside) A soldier. A wounded soldier. ... we all wanted from him something we had been waiting so long for, contact with that other world. A story. A war story. But instead he just talked about how everyone in Halifax had the flu. (Kerr, 2002, p. 37)

This excerpt depicts the beginning of people’s confusion following the arrival of the virus. Bea is shocked hearing soldiers’ stories about how the virus spread rather than the awaited stories of their battlefield heroism. Furthermore, this demonstrates the perplexity of soldiers who have been exposed to the virus before the people back home. Seeing soldiers returning with stories about illness rather than those of the battlefield made people anguished and frustrated, contributing to the overall dark and existential atmosphere of the era. Simultaneously, modernist writers were puzzled witnessing a major event like the First World War becoming intertwined

with the unknown pandemic that spread vastly, threatening people's lives.

The play's depiction of life during the Spanish flu and the COVID-19 pandemic seems uncannily similar. The Canadian performer Danny Saretsky, who played Stan, is surprised by the similarities between the play and the current situation, stating "There is a lot of similarities" (Toben, 2015) and that the play was "disturbingly parallel" (Toben, 2015) to our reality nowadays. Besides, the two pandemics are "eerily similar" from various aspects according to WCNC news channel report (Ruffes, 2021). Because of these many similarities of the life represented in *Unity (1918)* and our lives today, it became vital to uncover and build on these parallels. The most obvious one is the governmental role for mandatory restrictions for the sake of reducing the spread of the virus. In an interview with the Swiss news agency SDA, historian Kaspar Staub stated that "It's remarkable how ever-greater similarities are emerging in the actions of the government and the authorities during the pandemics in 1918 and 2020" (Swiss note many parallels between Covid-19 and Spanish flu, 2021). In the play, the government had to enforce new restrictions on people, such as social distancing, no spitting cautions, and mandatory quarantine for those infected, in order to reduce the damage of the virus. Anyone not abiding these laws will be fined:

Rose: ... No spitting in public.

Doris: If you have it [the virus] they put a notice on your door. You're quarantined.

Rose: I know, but it's a twenty-five dollars fine. (p. 51)

Within the climate of restrictions, a new law in *Unity* that designates the flu pandemic as a "reportable disease" (p. 51). And such a law, Doris explains, "means you have to report / occurrences of . . . [influenza] to the health authorities" (p. 51). McNulty, who asks Doris about the new pandemic-control policies, questions "why you'd report the flu in your house if it means that suddenly everyone avoids you like you have the plague" (p. 52). Furthermore, Bea reports that "the town has been quarantined. Not because

of illness, but because of fear of illness. No one is allowed to enter or leave. . . . Trains have been ordered not to stop. No pick ups or deliveries. The mail is piled outside of town and will be burned later" (p. 72). It seems that the government of *Unity* is bewildered by the idea of a new coming virus that has unknown consequences.

In the case of the recent virus, the governments have taken similar precautions to stop its spreading; the WHO issued a quarantine guideline to be relied on worldwide. The guidelines state that not only the infected ought to quarantine but also any other possible contacts (Considerations for quarantine of contacts of COVID-19 cases, 2021). Wearing masks was also one of the main precautions paralleled between the play and reality. In the play, citizens were not allowed to leave their place without wearing masks as masks were counted as the first defense line against the virus:

Rose: Mask. That's also the law... You can buy them or make them, but you can't go without one. (p. 52)

A close reading of the extract above reveals that almost every word and expression is relatable to the situation during COVID-19. Concerning masks, the WHO states on its website that "Masks are a key measure to suppress transmission and save lives" (When and how to use masks, 2021).

The simultaneous occurrence of both war and the pandemic put both people at home and soldiers on the battlefield in a state of defense against the unknown. While soldiers fought against human enemies, people back home fought against the pandemic, the similarity between the both creates a shift in the use of martial language which started to be used in describing the practices of nurses and health workers. While soldiers encourage each other, Bea encourages her friend Mary to "[turn] . . . defeat into victory" and to preserve her "Canadian Bravery" (p. 49). Then she approaches Mary, saying "we just have to be brave like a soldier" (p. 50). Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, martial language is present, as health workers

who look after COVID-19 patients are referred to as “frontline fighters” or “frontline heroes”.

The play does not only reflect the similarities between the Spanish flu in 1918 and the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of governmental restrictions but also mentions further social issues, such as the spread of misinformation in society. The spread of misinformation posed a serious problem even before the spread of the Spanish flu since propaganda and various rumors circulated in almost all the countries participating in the war. Upon the arrival of the Spanish flu in 1918, another wave of misinformation was emerging, in which the people associated the sudden spread of the pandemic with the First World War, subsequently blaming their rivals of developing the virus in a biological laboratory and using it as a biological weapon. The global health specialist Dr. Jonathan Quick emphasized three dynamic parallels of every pandemic, including the 1918 flu and the COVID-19 pandemic which are “blame, conspiracy, misinformation” (Ruffes, 2021). The virus had different names in each nation, thus “with the pandemic in 1918, the Spanish got blamed, and each nationality blamed another nationality or another group” (Ruffes, 2021). The 1918 virus was named the French Flu by the Spaniards, and the German Virus by the French, while Germans hypothesized that the virus originated in Russia (Toben, 2015). The virus had caused tremendous turmoil due to misinformation, and *Unity (1918)* has succinctly touched upon this notable side. In the play, the people of Unity believe that the virus might have been developed by the Germans as a secret weapon:

Man 2: I read that this flu is uh...might be the Germans. ... Some secret weapon they planted on the coast. (p. 85)

The anonymous Man 2 stands for the public’s opinion in the city. He also claims that he has “read” that it might be the Germans. This gives the impression that the media back then contributed in popularizing misinformation. Back in the First World War, Canada fought against the Germans

and the spread of misinformation targeting the enemy was not new in comparison to other nations. In reply to Man 2, Man 1 sarcastically replies “is that right. I thought it might be the germs” (p. 85). The public of Unity has formed a single picture of both the pandemic (germs) and the Germans and categorized them both as an existential enemy. This is similar in nature to the recent claims that COVID-19 was developed in Wuhan and was intended as a biological weapon in the middle of hate and racism against the Asian race.

The most critical pandemic facet that directly impacted people is the psychological one. Being surrounded by an invisible virus that has no track or treatment was bewildering back then. The civilians suffered psychologically from the virus as much as the soldiers did on the battlefield. Consequently, the fierce attack of the pandemic and the continuous death incidents left great psychological damage within people’s minds. The psychological impacts caused by the current pandemic are diverse, such as “anxiety, depression, PTSD, alcohol misuse, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, panic and paranoia” (Pedrosa et al., 2020, p. 4). In *Unity (1918)*, similar impacts can be noticed in the people of the city:

Mary: Beatrice, I’m so scared. What if the flu comes here? And we get it. I get it ... and die. / And then Richard (p. 50)

As the pandemic progresses, the characters in the play start to suffer from an existential crisis similar to that of war. Characters are afraid that the pandemic could mean the end of the world. Stan says that “This might be our last days on earth” (Kerr, 2002, p. 49) after the situation starts to deteriorate in Unity. Bea also starts thinking that the “world will come to an end this year!” (Kerr, 2002, p. 13). The same feeling has afflicted people during the COVID-19 pandemic as it was “a deeply existential issue that fundamentally changes people” (Van Tongeren et al., 2021, p. 1). To sum up, Kevin Kerr believes that the life under the pandemic depicted in *Unity (1918)* “such as government mandated health orders, mask controversies, social distancing,

the spread of misinformation, and of course the familiar emotional terrain of anxiety, fear, and even the fatigue of what seems to be a never ending war” (K. Kerr, personal communication, August 21, 2021) is relatively aligned with the life under the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

In the interwar period, modern literature has not focused much on the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918, nevertheless, its traces can be found in almost every work. Despair, emptiness, and gloominess were expressed in modernist writing not just as a result of the war, but also as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic’s representation within interwar literature was indirect and vague. In the late nineties, Kevin Kerr published *Unity (1918)* and its uniqueness stemmed from the fact that it addressed the reality of people under the flu pandemic in a detailed way. *Unity (1918)* gained popularity recently during the COVID-19 crisis because of its striking resemblance to life under COVID-19, despite the fact that *Unity (1918)* is about a pandemic that occurred more than a century ago. Almost every aspect of COVID-19 can be compared with other ones found in the play. Kevin Kerr’s *Unity (1918)* can be more elaborative and more attractive in describing the pandemic flu than history books.

References

- Cole, S. (2014). *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*. Oxford University Press.
- Considerations for quarantine of contacts of COVID-19 cases. (Jun 25, 2021). *World Health Organization*. <https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/WHO-2019-nCoV-IHR-Quarantine-2021.1>
- Kerr, K. (2002). *Unity (1918)*. Talonbooks.
- Outka, E. (2019). *Viral Modernism*. Columbia University Press.
- Pedrosa, A. L., Bitencourt, L., Frões, A. C. F., Cazumbá, M. L. B., Campos, R. G. B., de Brito, S. B. C. S., & Silva, A. C. S. (2020). Emotional, behavioral, and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*.
- Ruffes, V. (Oct 11, 2021). “Masking, protests, multiple waves: How the 1918 flu pandemic is eerily similar to and alarmingly different than the COVID-19 pandemic” *WCNC Charlotte*. <https://www.wcnc.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/1918-flu-pandemicsimilar-different-covid-19-pandemic-duke-health-institute/275-deb940c3-d66e-4119-8b88-2badbde2c17f>
- Swiss note many parallels between Covid-19 and Spanish flu. (Feb 9, 2021). *Swissinfo*. <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-note-many-parallels-between-covid-19-and-spanish-flu/46356364>
- Toben, B. (2015). “Another drama about another pandemic” *Westmount Magazine*. <https://www.westmountmag.ca/unity-1918/>
- Van Tongeren, D. R., & Van Tongeren, S. A. S. (2021). Finding Meaning Amidst COVID-19: An Existential Positive Psychology Model of Suffering. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*.
- When and how to use masks. (Dec 1, 2020). *World Health Organization*. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>