

Grief, Exploitation, Blame: An Echo of Rhetoric in the Influenza and Coronavirus Pandemics

Miranda Cox

Faculty Mentor: Anthony Wilson, PhD
Humanities Department/English Program

I stand frozen. I am surrounded by bare-faced people. I feel the cotton fabric covering the bottom half of my face tighten as I struggle to breathe. I notice the droplets of sweat forming on my brow. I clench my fists as I fight through the racing thoughts inside of my brain. I guess this is it: my turn to catch the virus, my turn to spread it to the people closest to me, my turn to lose. This is the anxiety of today. This is the anxiety of yesterday. This is the anxiety of a worldwide pandemic.

Historical Context of Pandemics

The Influenza pandemic of 1918 and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 both caused this kind of fear and anxiety in people around the world. In 1918, this fear lived in the knowledge that a deadly presence infected the very air that people breathed. The fear was so great that even after the pandemic ended, the memory of it generated a constant lingering anxiety throughout communities around the world (Outka 18). The 1918 virus, while causing the normal symptoms that came along with the flu, such as fever, headache, and cough, also produced more alarming symptoms. The virus would create a deadly form of pneumonia within the lungs, and many doctors reported that patients suffered from bleeding of the nose, mouth, or ears (Outka 16). The cough that the flu would produce would become so severe that it could cause ripping of the muscles and rib cartilage. A patient's entire body would begin to give off a horrible odor and ache to the point where it would feel as if their bones were breaking (Outka 17). The virus could also cause short- and long-term mental instability, due to the high fevers created in a victim's body to fight off the virus. The fevers could produce delirium and disorientation (Outka 17). In the final stages, victims of Influenza often suffered from "heliotrope cyanosis," a condition causing the lungs to become so full of fluid that a person's body would turn purple or blue. This led to Influenza's infamous name, "the purple death" (Outka 17).

The Influenza virus was like nothing that anyone had ever seen before; as Elizabeth Outka discusses in *Viral Modernism*, "In France, the flu 'swept through the lines so suddenly and with such ferocity that it startled even doctors

who'd served in Gallipoli and Salonika and [had] witnessed [hospital] wards overflowing with amoebic dysentery and malaria cases'" (14). Outka says, "By September, the flu was racing through towns and cities across the globe. One doctor lamented that watching the men 'dropping out like flies' was worse than 'any sight they ever had in France after a battle'" (Outka 14). The only information medical professionals had about Influenza was that it could be transmitted through germs in the air and contact with others, so they urged patients to stay at home. In many areas throughout the United States, masks were widely distributed and used (Outka 18). Influenza bled into every corner of America, and Americans, including medical professionals, were not prepared for the destruction and death that it would cause (Crosby 64).

Outka discusses the gravity of the pandemic of 1918, stating, "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 10). This anxiety is echoed in the pandemic of today. The Coronavirus first surfaced in a Chinese seafood and poultry market in December 2019 and quickly spread to nearly every country, completely shutting the world down by March of 2020 (Taylor). The illness spread quickly through China, and by the end of December 2019, the Chinese government confirmed that health authorities were treating dozens of cases of illness that researchers identified as a new virus (Taylor). This new virus spread across the world rapidly. By 21 January 2020, the first case of Coronavirus was confirmed in the United States, and by February, the World Health Organization proposed an official name for the disease that the virus causes: Covid-19 (Taylor). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised that there be no gatherings of more than ten people in the United States over the next eight weeks. There could be no more weddings, festivals, parades, concerts, sporting events, or conferences (Taylor). Schools began to close, unemployment spiked, grocery stores were being wiped out of all essential products; the world was now officially in chaos (Taylor).

This massive shutdown that occurred across the world was due to the fact that this virus, just like Influenza, could be spread to hundreds of people at an exponential rate. Symptoms from the virus may appear two to fourteen days after exposure, but an individual could be asymptomatic, meaning that they would not be aware that they were carrying a deadly virus inside of them that could possibly be infecting other people (“Symptoms of Coronavirus”). When symptoms did arise, an individual would experience a loss of taste or smell and fatigue at the start but slowly would begin to develop a fever and have difficulty breathing due to a persistent pain or pressure in the chest. Later, a cough and sore throat would arise, along with body aches, headaches, and congestion. The worst of it was the constant nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Many people also experienced either insomnia or an inability to wake from their sleep. Near the end, when the virus had almost taken every bit of life out of the person, their skin, lips, and nail beds would begin to turn a pale gray or a blue color (“Symptoms of Coronavirus”). Similar to the Influenza era, human beings were not prepared for the pandemic of 2020 or the massive death toll that would come along with it. The Coronavirus has killed 3,128,353 people across the world, 587,498 in the United States alone, and, in 2021, this number continues to rise (“Coronavirus”).

That amount of loss, this amount of fear and anxiety, creates this collective grief that affects all of us. David Davis discusses this in his article “The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Traumatic Memory, and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918.” He says, “Most trauma theorists locate trauma’s impact in the individual memory, where the unsettling experience disrupts the victim’s identity, but when a disruptive event affects a large population simultaneously, a collective trauma occurs” (Davis). Whether it is the loss of regular hair salon visits or social interactions or family reunions—or the worst of them all—the loss of human life, we are all grieving for whatever we have lost in this pandemic. The people in 1918 felt that same loss and grief as Influenza took millions of lives.

Are the rhetorical reactions to the loss of life in the Influenza pandemic of 1918 and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 similar? Is there some sort of constant collective response to massive tragedy and trauma that a pandemic causes? The rhetorical reactions to the Influenza pandemic of 1918 and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 are strikingly similar. Whether it is the exploitation of people, the blame placed on the Chinese, the spark of anger and protest against racially disproportionate death, or the final coping and acceptance of loss seen in literature, these pandemics created analogous human experiences and rhetorical reactions one entire century apart.

Exploitation in Pandemics

Because of the collective grief and fear that was instilled in people across the United States by these

pandemics, many organizations, companies, and politicians were able to exploit that grief and fear for their own advantage. They would use rhetoric to exploit people’s money and influence their opinions. There was a constant bombardment of anti-science rhetoric in newspapers, advertisements, and presidential administrations throughout the Influenza and Coronavirus pandemics. During each pandemic, scientists informed the public of the precautions that they needed to take in order to remain safe from the virus. Scientists explained treatment options for people diagnosed with the virus. Most importantly, they did their best to keep the citizens of the United States safe. However, there were (and will always be) people who defy science in pursuit of their own agenda. Whether it is 1918 or 2022, whether it is the Influenza or Coronavirus pandemic, there were (and will always be) government leaders or chief executives of large companies who see people only as something to manipulate for their own political or financial benefit, and, unfortunately, there were (and will always be) people who fall for their persuasive speeches and manipulative games.

In the midst of the Influenza pandemic, there were many examples of this kind of exploitation. Many different groups preached nonscientific procedures and methods, claiming that they could stop Influenza. Due to the encouragement that soldiers received from the military to smoke cigarettes during World War I, once the pandemic was in full swing, cigarettes were promoted as a “prophylactic” against Influenza (Spinney 236). Another form of contest against conventional science and medicine were Christian Scientists. These “scientists” refused any form of medical interventions for Influenza. They claimed that prayer was the only healing that people needed to survive the virus (Spinney 236). They called it “faith-healing.” This rhetorical phrase spread across the country, rapidly causing a large group of Americans to reject conventional medicine as a treatment for Influenza (Spinney 236).

While this language of “prophylactic” that was encouraged by the military and “faith-healing” that was distributed by Christian Scientists was detrimental to the prevention of illness and death in the United States throughout the Pandemic of 1918, it was not even the most persistent source of exploitation seen during Influenza. The most persistent was actually a small group of chiropractors. There were multiple chiropractors throughout the pandemic who took out whole sections of newspapers in order to advertise their “guard against Influenza” (*Denison Review*). These chiropractors greatly downplayed the seriousness of the pandemic by using language such as “A Few Funny ‘Flu’ Frivolities” (*Audubon County Journal*). One chiropractor named J. W. Hall made this statement:

I have been asked “Don’t you believe in the Flu?”
Of course I do. I believe in all things good or bad,

right or wrong. I believe in the fact that every fall we will have an “epidemic” of something. I believe next fall we’ll have another epidemic. I believe there hasn’t been a fall in Exira, when 1 per cent of the population haven’t had a cold or have the Grippe for a few days. (*Audubon County Journal*)

These chiropractors, while downplaying the intensity of the pandemic, also used rhetoric to profit from people’s fear of Influenza. J. W. Hall took out an entire page in the *Audubon County Journal* for his advertisement, which read, “We know that there is a cause for disease. We find out where it is. We give nature a chance by removing that cause. WE ADJUST IT!” Hall goes on to explain how chiropractic adjustments would stop Influenza with “100 percent degree of efficiency” (*Audubon County Journal*). Other chiropractors pointed out that “No curative agent has so successfully handled Spanish Influenza as the Chiropractors” and how “Chiropractic adjustments is the safest guard against the dreaded disease” (*Denison Review*). This kind of rhetoric that Hall and other chiropractors circulated through advertisements in a multitude of newspapers may have brought in more business for their practices, but it also spread the idea that Influenza was just another small cold that was nothing to worry about. They spread the idea that simple chiropractic adjustments were all the preventative measures that one needed against the virus. This language was extremely dangerous and probably had a detrimental effect on the death toll in the United States.

This rhetoric is very similar to that of 2020 during the Coronavirus pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, people pushed the harmful rhetoric that the pandemic was a hoax or not dangerous, while also making claims about miraculous cures or treatments for the Coronavirus that expert scientists had to debunk. A perfect example of this is former President Donald Trump and a man named Mike Lindell. Lindell is the chief executive of MyPillow, a million-dollar bedding company (Karni). In a *New York Times* article, Heather Murphy discusses how former President Trump welcomed Lindell into the White House for a meeting to propose a treatment for the Coronavirus called Oleandrin. Lindell, someone who holds a financial stake in and is a board member for the company that makes this compound, along with being an enthusiastic donor for the Trump administration, expressed that the president was thrilled about the drug when he heard about it (Murphy). Lindell explained that “This thing works—it’s the miracle of all time” (Murphy). However, Murphy says that “the unsubstantiated claims alarmed scientists. No studies have shown that Oleandrin is safe or effective as a coronavirus treatment,” and “Ingesting even a tiny bit of the toxic shrub the compound comes from could kill you” (Murphy). Therefore, both President Trump and Lindell used their influence and rhetoric to push their own agendas that, while generating them more money, could cause more sickness and death.

Throughout the Influenza and the Coronavirus pandemics, the exploitative rhetoric causing millions of people to deny basic scientific and medical facts was prevalent. Whether it was the idea of cigarettes as “prophylactics,” prayer as “faith-healing,” chiropractic adjustments as a preventive measure for Influenza, or a man who sells pillows for a living making claims about a “miracle drug” for the Coronavirus, each pandemic aroused the same anti-science rhetoric that spread across the United States, resulting in more illness and fatalities.

Blame in Pandemics

Because of the tragedies resulting from a seemingly invisible and unstoppable virus, people wanted answers. People wanted to pinpoint who was responsible for the millions of deaths worldwide. This prompted people from both 1918 and 2020 to search for someone or someplace to blame for the deaths and debilitation of the world. In 1918, during this search for the origin of the Influenza virus, a theory came about that China was to blame. Laura Spinney addresses this in *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* when she says, “The quick pointing of fingers to the east was probably influenced—albeit often unconsciously—by contemporary western attitudes towards the people of East Asia, known collectively as the myth of the ‘Yellow Peril’” (Spinney 153). Because of this rhetoric, this naming of an entire group of people as the “yellow peril,” Western civilization began to blame all of East Asia for many kinds of ludicrous crimes and phenomena, such as falling birth rates in Europe, rise in criminal activity, and the kidnapping of women, so it was not a far leap to blame the whole of East Asia for the worldwide pandemic.

Subsequently, this kind of rhetoric had significant consequences for the citizens of and immigrants to the United States. Due to the rhetoric that resulted from the Chinese Blame Theory and other factors of the Influenza pandemic, the United States began making decisions regarding the halt of all immigration into the country. According to *The Liberal Democrat*, the Johnson Immigration Bill would suspend immigration into the United States for an entire year, but the *New-York Tribune* caught the underlying story with the headline “Senate to Act Slowly on Immigration Bill.” The report on the Johnson Bill describes how, while the bill was passed in the House of Representatives, there was some division within the Senate committee over the action of the bill. The *Tribune* quotes, “While some members of the committee would like to have quick action taken to report out an anti-immigration measure, others are insistent that it would be well to find out whether reports that a great flood of European immigration of an undesirable sort is imminent are exaggerated” (*New-York Tribune*). The Senate committee had to make a decision, not only concerning the Johnson Bill, but also between numerous immigration bills that had come across the floor. These included “the Sterling bill for an

overhauling of the existing law, putting the administration of immigration restriction in the hands of a board; the Dillingham bill for admission on a basis of percentage of resident nationality and the Overman bill for shutting aliens out for five years” (*New-York Tribune*). This multitude of immigration bills and the potential hold on immigration in the United States came from the innate discrimination found in the rhetoric that came out of the Chinese Blame Theory. It came from a fear and detesting of the East and all immigrants in general.

This kind of “Asian blame” seems to be a repeating factor in pandemics. The United States’ own former president blamed Chinese people for the spread of the Coronavirus. President Trump made it a point to use discriminatory language when referring to the Coronavirus, outwardly using the terms “Chinese Virus,” “Wuhan Virus,” and “Kung Flu” (Rogers). In one of the first news briefings with the Coronavirus task force on 18 March 2020, President Trump can be heard saying, “I would like to begin by announcing some important developments in our war against the Chinese virus.” President Trump’s language here, saying *war* against the *Chinese* virus, implies violence. Whether he meant to imply such a thing or not, his language had an effect on millions of people across the country and the world. Many Asian Americans, along with Chinese officials, were angered by the former President’s language. They claimed that “labeling the virus that way will only ratchet up tensions between the two countries, while resulting in the kind of xenophobia that American leaders should discourage” (Rogers). The foreshadowing in this scenario cannot get any more devastating because, unfortunately, these Americans and officials were correct.

Due to the rhetoric that former President Trump propagated throughout the pandemic of 2020, hate crimes against Asian Americans rose greatly. Rogers asserts, “Asian Americans reported incidents of racial slurs and physical abuse because of the erroneous perception that China is the cause of the virus” (Rogers). In New York City, there have been an unfathomable number of incidents of violence against Asian Americans. Alexandra E. Petri and Daniel E. Slotnik acknowledge these stories in their article called “Fear and Rage Grip Asian Americans in New York amid a Wave of Attacks”:

Crisanna Tang was riding the subway to work one July morning when a maskless man spat on her and yelled that Chinese people had caused the virus. None of the other passengers intervened, Ms. Tang said. (Petri and Slotnik)

Mimi Lau said strangers shouted racist slurs and threatened her physical safety twice last year, once on the D train and once outside the mochi shop she owns in Manhattan's East Village. (Petri and Slotnik)

“I’ve never cried like that before,” Ms. Cheng said, describing her reaction to security footage that showed her mother being shoved to the ground last week on a crowded street in Flushing, Queens. “To see my mother get thrown like that, she looks like a feather. She looks like a rag doll.” The attack on Ms. Cheng’s mother, which was highlighted by celebrities and gained widespread attention on social media, was one of four against Asian-American women in New York City that day. (Petri and Slotnik)

Concerns intensified after a man of Asian descent was stabbed Thursday night near Chinatown. (Petri and Slotnik)

In Atlanta, Georgia, on 16 March 2021, a white man walked into three different massage establishments and murdered eight people, six of whom were of Asian descent (Derrick). Many of the Asian Americans who were victims of attacks in 2020 said that the scars were lasting. All of this hatred, stemming from a simple phrase, the “Chinese Virus,” left scars and incited violence upon Asian Americans.

The language and rhetoric that leaders and civilizations use influence people’s views and beliefs about certain situations, and it most definitely influenced people’s opinions on who was to blame for Influenza and the Coronavirus. The phrase “yellow peril” that circulated through the whole of western civilization influenced the United States government to create the Johnson Bill. The phrase “Chinese Virus” that was propagated by the former President of the United States influenced and encouraged violence against Asian Americans.

Riots and Protest in Pandemics

While language and rhetoric can affect law-making and racial violence, it can also incite anger and empower protest. This is seen during both Influenza and COVID-19. Throughout these two pandemics, people of color, specifically the Black community, experienced a disproportionate amount of death from the virus compared to the White community in America. James Feigenbaum explains that “From 1906 to 1920, African Americans in cities experienced a rate of death from infectious disease that was greater than what urban whites experienced during the 1918 flu pandemic” (Feigenbaum). Southern cities had a higher death and infectious mortality rate than any other region in the United States. This was all due to the fact that Southern cities were populated by a greater proportion of Black residents, who were more at risk of death from infectious disease (Feigenbaum).

During 2020, Brad Boserup conducted a study based on the “Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Racial and Ethnic Minorities.” His study concluded that the

COVID-19 pandemic impacted all ethnic and racial minority groups disproportionately (Boserup). The minority groups include African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. All of these groups experienced higher infection rates than Whites in states across the country (Boserup). This is most likely due to the study's findings that there were "relatively low hospitalization rates among some racial and ethnic minority groups," which may imply significant disparities in access to care (Boserup). All of this, along with the daily racism and violence that the Black communities had to endure during the Influenza pandemic and continued to endure during the Coronavirus pandemic, sparked outrage and protest across the United States.

In the midst of the Influenza pandemic, in the Red Summer of 1919, race riots broke out across the United States. There were riots in Longview, Texas; Omaha, Nebraska; and Washington D.C., but on 27 July 1919, the gruesome race riot in Chicago, Illinois gave the summer of 1919 its "red" name. That day many Chicagoans visited Lake Michigan to cool off from the heat of the summer. According to Julius Jones from the Chicago History Museum, a 17-year-old African American boy named Eugene Williams was among the many Chicagoans. Jones explains that Williams and his friends "inadvertently drifted across an invisible line that divided the waters by race, [when] a group of Whites, insulted by such an act, began throwing stones at them, one of which struck Williams, causing him to drown." The murder of Eugene Williams is what set off the Chicago riots, and in turn, the Red Summer of 1919 (Jones).

The streets of Chicago were in chaos. There were bodies lying in alleyways, on sidewalks. Hundreds of people were injured from the attacks. "The violence that started at the beach spread through Chicago's Black Belt on the South Side, especially in residential areas surrounding the Union Stock Yard" (Jones). Many people, White and Black, rushed to join the riots. When finding out that most of the wounded black men and women from the Chicago attacks were being taken to Provident Hospital, an institution for people of color, a mob of White people attacked the building, causing major damage (*Metropolis Weekly Gazette*). The riots were out of control to the point where the Illinois National Guard was brought in to bring the violence to a halt (Jones). Jones also states, "After seven days of shootings, arson, and beatings, the Race Riot resulted in the deaths of 15 whites and 23 blacks with an additional 537 injured (195 white, 342 black)" (Jones).

These riots, as bloody and violent as they were, occurred because of the impact that language and rhetoric had on a large group of people. It was the discriminatory language that many Whites used to refer to Black men and women that filled the Black communities with anger, but it was mostly the empowering language that came out of many of those same Black communities that started the riots and the fight for

justice during the peak of the Influenza pandemic. One Black man, interviewed for the *Cayton's Weekly*, said, "We are tired of bein' picked on and bein' beat up. We have been through war and given everything, given our lives, and now we are going to stop bein' beat up." Another man, a teacher, said, "These riots are only some of many which will probably occur in many places. The accumulated sentiment against injustice to colored people is such that they will not be abused any longer" (*Cayton's Weekly*). These are the same sentiments and language against injustice that created the Black Lives Matter movement in 2015 and maintained it for years to come.

The same rhetoric and language occurred again in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic when George Floyd, an African American man, was murdered by police officers over an alleged counterfeit twenty-dollar bill (Arango). On 25 May 2020, police officers approached Floyd and, while Floyd was obviously distressed and panicked, proceeded to try and force him into the back seat of a police vehicle. The officers are then seen throwing Floyd face down onto the ground, as Officer Derek Chauvin proceeded to forcefully place his knee on the back of Floyd's neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds until Floyd was left lying on the ground with no pulse (Arango). This blatant racism and contempt for African American lives in the United States sparked the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.

The phrase "Black Lives Matter" means something to people across the country. Maneesh Arora discusses this in the *Washington Post* article "How the Coronavirus Pandemic Helped the Floyd Protests Become the Biggest in U.S. History." Arora explains that, during the pandemic, the protests appeared to be happening more frequently, and more protesters attended Black Lives Matter protests than before (Arora). Political scientist Jamila Michener found that "those who have seen financial losses from pandemic public health measures are more likely to protest" (qtd. in Arora). Due to the financial injustices done to people by the pandemic and the ample amount of time the pandemic presented many with, people outside of the Black community opened their eyes to the reality of injustice that Black individuals face in the United States on a daily basis. They began to understand the rhetoric and language of the Black Lives Matter movement and what it means to people more than they did before the Coronavirus appeared.

Therefore, because of the disproportionate death rates among people of color from the Coronavirus, because of the murder of George Floyd, because of the endless time that people had on their hands due to the pandemic, in 2020, the phrase Black Lives Matter motivated 15 million to 26 million Americans to take to the streets to protest police violence (Arora). The significance of the phrase "Black Lives Matter" was demonstrated again on 20 April 2021 when a jury pronounced the policeman who had murdered George Floyd, "Mr. Chauvin[,] guilty on all three charges: second-degree

murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter” (Eligon). “People gathered at the intersection where Mr. Floyd was killed, now known as George Floyd Square, and the word ‘Guilty’ rippled throughout the crowd after the verdict was announced, prompting cheers and sobs. The crowd began to chant, ‘Black lives matter’” (Eligon). This rhetoric inspired and continues to inspire cheers, sobs, and activism. The words “Black Lives Matter” gave Floyd and his family justice.

The language and sentiments against injustice after the murder of Eugene Williams in 1919 and George Floyd in 2020 sparked a cry of outrage throughout the United States of America. In 1919, race riots erupted across the country, creating the Red Summer of 1919, and in 2020, there were Black Lives Matter protests in almost every major city across the United States. These sentiments matter. This rhetoric matters, especially in a global pandemic where people are dying daily from a seemingly unstoppable virus.

Grief Literature in Pandemics

The grief and pain that come along with mass death during a pandemic are substantial, and the memory of the emotional and physical trauma that we have all experienced lives on inside of us long after the pandemic’s end. That memory also lives inside of the literature and art that people create during or after an unprecedented time such as a pandemic. Outka discusses this in *Viral Modernism* when she says, “Despite the pandemic’s seeming disappearance, its traces are everywhere in the literature and the culture” (11). This is true not only of the Influenza pandemic but also of the Coronavirus pandemic that is still taking place. The literature produced within or after these pandemics brings us into the fear and pain of the world controlled by a virus.

In 1918, during the Influenza Pandemic, Katherine Anne Porter and William Butler Yeats wrote about their experience with the deadly virus. The pandemic affected the lives of these two artists greatly. Therefore, Porter, an author of many short stories, and Yeats, a distinguished Irish poet, used literature to cope with the trauma and loss that they felt from Influenza. They needed their own gifts of writing and poetry to help them release the emotions and pain that was wrapped up inside of them. It was, in a way, a type of therapy.

Porter experienced the peril of Influenza firsthand when she was infected in 1918 and barely survived. It was just two years after she had beaten tuberculosis that she was victimized by the Influenza epidemic that was sweeping through the United States (Howard). She was hospitalized for nine days with a temperature of 105 degrees. She was facing the possibility, and most thought probability, of death (Howard). However, an experimental drug called strychnine was given to her and ended up saving her life. This near-death experience was the inspiration that Porter needed to immortalize her experience with Influenza and write her short

novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (Howard). William Howard describes how Porter “Herself regarded the incident as an important dividing line in her life, after which she devoted herself more purposefully to her writing career” (Howard).

Pale Horse, Pale Rider exemplifies the pain and loss felt by millions of people in the United States and across the world during the pandemic of 1918. The short novel tells the story of a young woman named Miranda who, while fighting to survive Influenza, experiences a horrific nightmare where she is being chased by Death, the pale rider. Miranda survives the virus, but right before she wakes from her coma, her nightmare turns into a simple dream that takes her to this serene, beach-like landscape where, to her amazement, she is surrounded by all of the human beings she has ever known. She is at peace, but her mind cannot stop and begins to distrust the scene that she is seeing (Porter 254-255). She begins to feel as though she has forgotten something when “A thought struggled at the back of her mind, came clearly as a voice in her ear. Where are the dead? We have forgotten the dead, oh, the dead, where are they? At once as if a curtain had fallen, the bright landscape faded, she was alone in a strange stony place of bitter cold, picking her way along a steep path of slippery snow, calling out, Oh, I must go back” (Porter 254-255)! Miranda struggles to wake from her dream and acclimate to her new hospital environment. She struggles to leave all of the people that she had ever known behind in her dream. She struggles to find her place in reality when all she truly longs for is her dream.

Shortly after Miranda wakes from her coma, a celebration erupts throughout the hospitals with shouting and singing. Mrs. Tanner, her nurse, comes in and says, “Hear that? They’re celebrating. It’s the Armistice. The war is over, my dear” (Porter 256). Voices began to sing “My country, ‘tis of thee ...,” and Miranda finishes the line with “Sweet land ... oh, terrible land of this bitter world where the sound of rejoicing was a clamor of pain where ragged tuneless old women, sitting up waiting for their evening bowl of cocoa, were singing, ‘Sweet land of Liberty--’” (Porter 256). This is an intense way of describing a moment of celebration, an end to a war. However, the reasoning behind this response might be found in the next paragraphs. Miranda goes on to question the line “Oh, say can you see,” while Mrs. Tanner tells her again that the war is over. Miranda’s only response is “Please open the window, please, I smell death in here” (Porter 256). This language here, the way that Miranda describes the celebration of the end of the war, the concept of Miranda being able to smell death in a room, is all intentional. Porter is illustrating that while World War I is over, the war on an unstoppable virus has yet to be stopped. She is emphasizing that there is still death occurring all around them, so why celebrate? While reading these sections of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, the reader can feel the grief, anger, and trauma that inspired Porter to write the short novel. The after-life experience, the pain of loss, and the survivor’s guilt that

Porter most likely experienced in her own bout with Influenza are evident in the literature that she created.

Yeats's poetic words and the language that he uses express the pain and trauma that he, along with Porter, experienced. Yeats had just witnessed the mass amount of death that resulted from World War I when millions more people began to die from the Influenza pandemic. As with Porter, the virus took on a very personal role in his life when it infected his pregnant wife, Georgie Hyde-Lees (Simon). Influenza almost took both her life and their child's life. While the two did survive, the trauma that Yeats experienced from witnessing the imminent death of his wife and unborn child must have been considerable (Simon). In the midst of this pain and trauma, Yeats wrote the poem "The Second Coming."

This poem exemplifies the apocalyptic experience that people in the United States and across the world witnessed in World War I and the Influenza pandemic. In the poem, Yeats describes the second coming of Christ, saying, "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand" (lines 9-10). Yeats watched as the world and his world, almost crumbled before him. The trauma from that is evident in this poem, specifically in the first stanza:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (lines 1-8)

There is a sense of grief in the language here: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" and "The ceremony of innocence is drowned." This language resonates with the pure chaos experienced by millions during Influenza. It expresses the magnitude of loss that left its mark on the world, that left its mark on Yeats and inspired this poem filled with pain and chaos. While the beginning of this stanza hits on the pain that Yeats was feeling, the last lines of the stanza pinpoint the anger that often comes with grief. Yeats writes "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" (lines 7-8). This is a powerful comment on the different types of human response to massive loss of life, whether that be from war or a pandemic, that actually harkens back to the exploitative rhetoric that was rampant during the pandemic of 1918. Yeats is attacking a conundrum that is seen during this time when the best people have grown apathetic, but the worst people remain eager and impassioned. The whole of this stanza really exemplifies the collective grief that was created by the Influenza pandemic.

Similar to Influenza, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought mass death and along with that, trauma and pain from

the loss of society and life. Robin Wright discusses this fact through some of their own experiences in their article, "How Loneliness from Coronavirus Isolation Takes Its Own Toll." They describe how they "Live alone and have no family, and usually don't think much about it. But, as the new pathogen forces us to socially distance, [they] have begun to feel lonely. [They] miss the ability to see, converse with, hug, or spend time with friends. Life seems shallower, more like survival than living" (Wright). This idea that people are just surviving rather than actually living compares greatly with the apocalyptic ideas in Yeats's "Second Coming," and is how many people felt as the Influenza and Coronavirus pandemics raged on.

People feel lost without human connection and physical interaction. This kind of isolation and anxiety felt in a pandemic is known to take a physical toll on the human brain and body. While, in 1918, people were not really aware of the issues of mental health, in 2020, there are hundreds of studies and research on mental health. According to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a neuroscientist and psychologist at Brigham Young University, loneliness can increase the rate of early death, and social isolation and living alone can lead to an increased rate of mortality (qtd. in Wright). This kind of worldwide crisis can also produce specific circumstances that could significantly increase the risk of depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Wright).

As we look at the contemporary literature that has already come out of the pandemic of 2020, there is a huge emphasis on the depression and traumatic experiences that have been brought on by the Coronavirus. There is a strong sense of pain and loss in the contemporary literature of today, just as there was in the words of Porter and Yeats. Alice Quinn, a well-known editor, wanted to memorialize the experiences and emotions of the Coronavirus, so she brought many American poets together and asked them for any poetry that they had written during the first part of the pandemic. She collected this pandemic poetry and called it *Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*. Two poems from this collection of work, "Come Back, Come Back" by Jesse Ball and "May Day" by Nicholas Christopher, reveal the pain and trauma that sprung up inside of many people from the events of the 2020 pandemic.

In "Come Back, Come Back," Ball's words recount the massive amount of loss that came out and continues to come out of the Coronavirus pandemic:

Oh there was no wind. These were the days
When babies were born
in graves, old men buried in hospital beds
Still the song came in, came in
Where my ears weren't.
*O you who will never leave us, all you,
Come back, Come back.* (Ball 6-7)

Ball's descriptions here of babies being born in graves and old men being buried in hospital beds paints a pretty gruesome but real picture of the pandemic of 2020. He acknowledges the many losses that have occurred throughout the world: the loss of children, siblings, parents, grandparents, friends. Ball deciding to end the poem with the words "Oh you will never leave us, all you, / Come back, Come back" was very heartfelt and intentional (Ball 6-7). He acknowledges the massive loss of life that everyone has experienced because of the Coronavirus and then ends his poem with a plea. The speaker begs all of the dead to please come back. It is a tragic and totally emotional ending that leaves readers either contemplating their own personal grief from the pandemic or at least sympathizing with the speaker's pain.

This kind of understanding of loss carries over into Christopher's poem "May Day." The first stanza begins by describing a "demented song" that a woman is wailing on a dark street corner. The speaker explains that the day that the woman is wailing this song is the day that "one hundred forty-four people in this city die of the same disease" (Christopher 26). It is interesting how Christopher describes this woman and the reason for her song in lines 9-18:

She is unseen invisible out of sight
 maybe no more out of her mind
 than anyone else
 except that she has taken herself

 to a dark corner crying out
 not for help
 not for the sick and suffering
 not for those who embrace or reject death

 not for the healers
 but for no one:" (Christopher 26)

In these lines, Christopher speaks to the nothingness and numbness that many people have felt throughout the pandemic of 2020. The fact that this woman on a dark street corner is crying out for nothing and no one speaks to the depression that Robin Wright is discussing in "How Loneliness from Coronavirus Isolation Takes Its Own Toll." Christopher is using his poetry to illustrate the feelings of isolation and loneliness that persist within a pandemic.

Outka said it best in *Viral Modernism*: "These realms of experience—the sensory, the atmospheric, and the affective—are often precisely the realms left out of written histories but infused into memories, poems, and novels" (11). The pain and trauma of loss, the isolation and loneliness, and the blatant numbness that came from these two pandemics was infused into these works of literature. Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and Yeats's "The Second Coming" express the emotions and reality of the Influenza pandemic, while

Ball's "Come Back, Come Back" and Christopher's "May Day" express the invisible pain and depression of the Coronavirus. One must remember that the inspiration for this novel and these poems came at a cost of trauma and depression. These writers and poets needed creativity, imagination, and the art of literature to get through the pain, loss, and depression caused by Influenza and the Coronavirus. These short novels and poems that we have analyzed are almost a snapshot, a memory, memorializing the trauma of the Influenza and Coronavirus pandemics.

Technological Differences in Pandemics

There are many parallels between these two pandemics, from the rhetoric that came out of exploitation, blaming, and protest to the memorialization of trauma and pain within literature. However, there is one significant difference between the Influenza pandemic and the Coronavirus pandemic, and that is technology. In the past one hundred years, technology has advanced greatly. Technological advances in medicine shrank the death toll between the pandemics by millions, and technological advances in communication, with the invention of the internet and social media, have completely altered the way human beings discuss pandemics. What would have been a popular, light-hearted Influenza cartoon in a newspaper now would be a viral meme making fun of the inconveniences of wearing a mask during the Coronavirus. It would have taken a couple days to a week for the news of the Red Summer riots of 1919 to be spread throughout the United States; when George Floyd was murdered, the entire world knew the next morning. As shown, the internet does provide society with great communication abilities, but with that also comes the ability to more efficiently spread false and possibly dangerous rhetoric to millions of people. What potentially dangerous rhetoric, during Influenza, would have taken weeks to spread, now, during the Coronavirus, takes only one minute to go viral. This difference has most likely caused rhetoric in 2020 to have more influence over individual, collective, and governmental decisions and opinions than in 1918.

Conclusion

Whether it is the exploitation of people, the blame placed on the Chinese, the spark of anger and protest against racial disproportionate death, or the final coping and acceptance of loss seen in literature, these pandemics created analogous human experiences and rhetorical reactions. Whether you are in 1918 or 2020, the human experiences and reaction to a global pandemic remain the same. Language still matters. Rhetoric still matters. It affects the way people view the critical nature of a pandemic. It affects the amount of people standing and fighting against injustice. It affects the amount of loss that we endure as a country. It affects the way that we write and create. The year in which a pandemic

arrives does not matter. The human reaction is still the same, and that matters.

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