The parallelism between Covid-19 pandemic and Jack London's The Scarlet Plague

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Abstract : *This paper aims to study the pandemic question as part of a phenomenon rooted in that set of imagined ideas, practices, orientations, values and so on that binds a society together, better known as social imaginary. Through the analysis of one of Jack London's masterpieces, The Scarlet Plague, it would be possible to draw a clear outline of the characteristic elements related to the perception of contamination-related phenomena. In her work 'Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo', Mary Douglas maintains that the fear of contamination tends to be amplified in a stressed social context and this is what actually happened to contemporary society during the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the study of The Scarlet Plague, which offers a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, will be possible to better understand the dynamics behind this mass hysteria and its implication with the topic of contamination. The aesthetic dimension, typical of the Literary field, finds its specificity within an overall theory of knowledge based on the internalization of reality. Jack London's prediction about the contemporary civilization's future seems to be not so far from nowadays reality, the parallelism between the recent COVID-19 Pandemic and The Scarlet Plague will help us to understand better the dynamics behind the social crisis and the real risk of the disintegration of the moral community.*

Keywords*: Pandemic, Contamination, Moral Community, Literature;*

I. INTRODUCTION

The following study aims to give a contribution to the field of sociological and cultural studies through the analysis of the relationship between social reality and literary representation. Starting from these observations it would be possible to draw a clear outline of the characteristic elements related to the perception of contamination-related phenomena. Before starting it is necessary to focus on the epistemological and methodological questions linked to the decision of analysing a cultural object like the novel. According to Luca Martignani

"an important epistemological and methodological need lies in clarifying the heuristic validity of 'heterodox' sources (such as the novel, for example, and literature more generally) in carrying out sociological research, mostly oriented toward deepening the nexus between reality and social construction. Introducing an interesting and original reflection on the nature of the social sciences and the consequences that this ontological status implies in terms of scientific observation (epistemological dimension) is certainly Philippe Corcuff." [1]

In his work *Pour une épistemologie de la fragilité. Plaidoyer en vue de la reconnaissance scientifique de pratiques transfrontalières,* Corcuff defines the concept of *pratiques transfrontaliéres* as

"A cross-borderer working to germinate forms of intelligibility at the border of different fields of knowledge and practice. I consider that this cross-border practice is not part of the core of social sciences, which should be able to be situated in the scientific dialogue between theory and empirical work that animates the logic of the production of sociological knowledge. However, I defend the legitimacy of such a cross-border activity, from the point of view of the scientific dynamic itself, in the sense that it can serve as an airlock for the continuous renewal of scientific categories, against the inertia and routines internal to the scientific fields themselves." [2]

This interdisciplinary approach leads Corcuff to place the epistemological and methodological framework between "the scientist stiffening that would legitimize it and the 'post-modern' relativism that would break its links with science" [2]; in other words, Corcuff is trying to underline the importance of the interdisciplinary approach in order to understand social phenomena through the analysis of different sources; According to Martignani it is important to sum up some of Corcuff's elements, previously discussed in his thesis, in order to understand the using of the fiction and representation as sources for analyzing the social reality and as a way to stimulate a debate on the relationship between social epistemology and ontology [1]; the scholar focuses on four points:

"(1) Firstly, the epistemological fragility of the social sciences can be translated into a critical and reflexive reflection on such a condition, reversing itself into an epistemology of fragility, abandoning the idea of objective knowledge of observed phenomena and obtaining - in return - a clarification of the difference between epistemology and ontology (Ferraris 2004) through the juxtaposition of learned literature and ordinary or everyday life (Cavell, 1981; transl. it. 1998; Kaufmann 2009; transl. it. 2015). (2) Secondly, fiction, cinema, and the novel (in particular) suggest that the scenarios depicted in them are the representation of a particular conception of philosophical anthropology [...]. (3) Similarly (as is the case with the science fiction, detective, or grotesque genre in particular), fiction helps to investigate the relationship between social science and political philosophy. (4) Finally, the importance of these types of sources lies in their ability to delineate utopias or dystopias, whose epistemological relevance lies in the de-naturalization of historically determined social forms and the stimulation of sociological imagination (Corcuff 2002, 28-31)." [1]

II. SOCIAL IMAGINARY AND LITERATURE

Wright Mills [16] defined the sociological imagination [17] as one of 'the biggest common denominators of our cultural life'1 capable of enlighting our social reality's vision. The social imaginary2 is able to create a bond between the individual and collective experiences, Runcini describes it as "a constellation of symbols, which arose as a cultural response to the events of nature [...] at the origins of human society in the act of annexing and classifying into signs and orders of representation the vast but dispersive heritage of individual experience" [3]. The foundational ideas for the current concept of the imaginary could be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's 1940 book The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination, which focuses on the nature of human consciousness and the organization of imagination. In the Philosophical Introduction of The Imaginary (2004), published by Routledge, Jonathan Webber underlines how "Sartre aims to show that a seemingly diverse array of experiences – including make-believe, watching an impressionist, watching a play, looking at pictures, forming mental images – share a fundamental structure. He further aims to delineate this structure and show that it is distinct from both the structure of perception and that of conceptual thought" [4]. The creation and development of imagination, where the imaginary finds his center of cultural elaboration, could be found in all of the psychological processes that give rise to the cognitive function that serves as the foundation of the interaction between subject and object; indeed this dichotomy is at the core of the process of defining the parameters of a space-time reality survey [3]. According to Runcini the social imaginary enters the field of literature as an element of the fantastic genre, the author also focuses on another important aspect of this literary genre, fear:

"In writing, the traumatic effect of destabilizing the subject, provoked by the fearful state, combining with that stage of the imagination in which the relationship between the determinate and the indeterminate appears irresolute, produces in the figures of the diverse forms of the transgression of every day that involve the reader in a dimension alien to his reassuring space-time horizon." [3]

Jack London's novel, The Scarlet Plague, is the perfect example of the science fiction genre combining fear and social imaginary, this novel is capable to give to the readers a key to understanding the pandemic phenomenon as an imaginal and communicative object. According to Camorrino:

"the Coronavirus pandemic - at the time of writing still ongoing - certainly represents a tragic event in the history of mankind. On this, we would like there to be no misunderstandings. Yet, from a sociological point of view, it constitutes a phenomenon of the utmost interest. Disasters bring with them an unveiling potential (Saitta, 2015), capable of bringing to the surface the subterranean tensions that, in a more or less tacit way, represent the imaginal background of associated living. Now, more than anything else, what effects has the virus produced? [...] We must therefore choose a particular angle in order to be able to say something adequate about this complex phenomenon. We could understand the coronavirus as a potential (and unfortunately not only potential) threat of death, invisible and contaminating." [5]

The next paragraph will focus on the social dynamics linked to the fear of contagion; The violent and unexpected encounter with the sickness results in a variety of simultaneous representations and communications that either help the subject strengthen his or her identity or cause them to become paralyzed and lose all control over both internal and exterior reality. Runcini sustains that "with the destabilization of the subject affected by the trauma there is, therefore, a temporary or definitive pause, depending on his psychophysiological a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. This leads to a third difference: (iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." [13]

state and his ability to organize and control the elements of the environment" [3]. This type of behavior is clinically conductible to the neurotic or psychotic state of the subject. An interesting contribution to the study of the relationship between fear of contagion and psychosis was given by Linda Wolfgang Loehde and Mina Novakovic from the Department of Psychotic Disorders, in Denmark. In their paper titled "Acute and Transient Psychotic Disorder induced by fear of coronavirus infection," the two scholars underline how "the psychological stress caused by the fear of infection can lead to the debut of psychotic manifestations and ATPD" [6]. Even if London's novel was published one hundred and ten years before the spreading of the Covid-19 disease, the author perfectly describes the sense of fear and psychosis that swirled among people during a pandemic situation [18].

III. FEAR OF CONTAGION: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE SCARLET PLAGUE AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As previously mentioned, the theme of fear of contagion is one of the dominant elements in London's work. In one of the protagonist's digressions episodes, the author shows us human nature's fragility and inability to react rationally to the fear of being exposed to a pathogenic agent:

"Yet in those few minutes I remained with the dying woman in my classroom, the alarm had spread over the university; and the students, by thousands, all of them, had deserted the lecture-room and laboratories. When I emerged, on my way to make report to the President of the Faculty, I found the university deserted. Across the campus were several stragglers hurrying for their homes. Two of them were running. "President Hoag, I found in his office, all alone, looking very old and very gray, with a multitude of wrinkles in his face that I had never seen before. At the sight of me, he pulled himself to his feet and tottered away to the inner office, banging the door after him and locking it. You see, he knew I had been exposed, and he was afraid. He shouted to me through the door to go away. I shall never forget my feelings as I walked down the silent corridors and out across that deserted campus. I was not afraid. I had been exposed, and I looked upon myself as already dead." [7]

President Hoag's reaction represents the panic activated by the perceptions of the human as a virus' vehicle, the idea that any of our neighbors could be a carrier of the disease represents what Elias calls 'emotional involvement' [15]. This is underlined also in another London's paragraph:

"In the morning, my brother came to me. I had gathered into a handbag what things of value I purposed taking, but when I saw his face I knew that he would never accompany me to the Chemistry Building. The plague was on him. He intended shaking my hand, but I went back hurriedly before him. "Look at yourself in the mirror," I commanded. "He did so, and at sight of his scarlet face, the color deepening as he looked at it, he sank down nervelessly in a chair. "'My God' he said. 'I've got it. Don't come near me. I am a dead man. " [7]

Mary Douglas, in her work titled Risk and Blame. An essay in Cultural Theory sustains that one of the "general traits of human society that fear of danger tends to strengthen the lines of division in a community." [8] Fear for one's own safety leads to a distorted perception of reality which induces the subject to create illogical attributions to certain causes, without the mediation of any empirical evidence. This is also evident in another paragraph of The Scarlet Plague

"When I arrived home, my housekeeper screamed as I entered, and fled away. And when I rang, I found the housemaid had likewise fled. I investigated. In the kitchen I found the cook on the point of departure. But she screamed, too, and in her haste dropped a suitcase of her personal." [7]

According to Mary Douglas, the contamination phenomena's perception belongs to the material and moral worlds, in Purity and Danger the scholar sustained that the fear of being contaminated could influence and reveal the real condition of the bounds which define the interaction between the human body, the natural world, and society. [9] In The Scarlet Plague London dwells on these three aspects and their interconnection in order to explain the reasons behind the proliferation of new diseases. The blame for the contagion falls on humankind and on its reprehensible behavior:

"Now this is the strange thing about these gernis. There were always new ones coining to live in men's bodies. Long and long and long ago, when there were only a few men in the world, there were few diseases. But as men increased and lived closely together in great cities and civilizations, new diseases arose, new kinds of germs entered their bodies. Thus were countless millions and billions of human beings killed. And the more thickly men packed together, the more terrible were the new diseases that came to be." [7]

In their work L'Immaginario Sociale Della Pandemia: Sacro, temporalità e "messa in scena del rischio, Camorrino and Savona underline the fact that "[...] any catastrophe awakens millenarian feelings, in which the symbolic dimension and that of guilt are pre- eminent (Placanica, 1990). That is, in essence, catastrophe evokes the dimension of the sacred in an immediate way (Camorrino, 2015), activating in various ways systems of justification for suffering (Berger, 1984)" [5]. This masochistic sense of guilt has its roots in the human perception of the dichotomy between disease and sin, typical of western cultures; London identifies the problem in the irresponsibility of the human being [19]; the egoistic approach, typical of a capitalistic society, is one of the reasons that led to the destruction of mankind. The unaccountability issue was strongly present during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also one of the elements that not only contributed to an increased sense of distrust and suspicion among fellow citizens but also led people to turn against each other. It is incredible how the social dynamics present in London's novel seem to be a foreshadowing of events that occurred in 2020.

Another aspect deeply linked to the fear of contagion is one of the great mass getaways from the pandemic epicenter. It was emblematic of the episode that occurred on March 2020 in Milan (Lombardia was the Italian epicenter of the Covid-19 epidemic at that time), where fleets of people stormed the Garibaldi railway station in order to flee to southern Italy and escape from the virus. That mass psychosis caused by the fear of being contaminated was promptly described in one of London's passages:

"Already the people had fled from the city by millions at first the rich, in their private motor-cars and dirigibles, and then the great mass of the population, on foot, carrying the plague with them, themselves starving and pillaging the farmers and all the towns and villages on the way. [7]

And more:

"There were numerous stalled motor cars, showing that the gasoline and the engine supplies of the garages had given out. [...] People slipped by silently, furtively, like ghosts —white-faced women carrying infants in their arms; fathers leading children by the hand; singly, and in couples, and in families — all flee- ing out of the city of death. [7].

It is fascinating how London describes the collapse of a society where individualism overwhelms the sense of community. The narration offered by the protagonist makes us reflect on the innermost corners of human nature, is what happens to human beings before those 'scenes made to harden hearts' an act of pure selfishness or a way to preserve themselves? London's observation that puts the reader in front of the facts is unexceptionable:

"and I knew, now, why it was that the fleeing persons I encountered slipped along so furtively and with such white faces. In the midst of our civilization, down in our slums and laborghettos, we had bred a race of barbarians, of savages ; and now, in the time of our lamity, they turned upon us like the wild beasts they were and destroyed us. And they destroyed themselves as well." [7]

Although man belongs to what is called the animal kingdom, what is previously described by the author is not to be found in the instinct of self-preservation (typical of all animal species), but rather in a malevolent, selfish nature where humans are capable of "inflamed themselves with strong drink and committed a thousand atrocities, quarreling and killing one another in the general madness." [7] O. Fatica focuses on this aspect in his analysis of London's novel, titled"Davanti a una terra desolata":

"with the plague, which stands out relentlessly from the title, the loss of difference emerges, and violence spreads like a virus, outbreaks become more and more virulent, atavistic fears resurface in new guises, a contagious outbreak. The plague marks the ever-looming end of the group, violence becomes generalised within it, and each individual clings tooth and nail to his or her own supposed difference - to the point of carnage." [10]

Even if it seems obvious that during all the pandemic episodes faced by humankind through centuries, men have always behaved in common and familiar ways; that is not the first time that literary authors write about epidemics (just think of Boccaccio, Manzoni, M. Shelley, etc.); the choice to uses The Scarlet Plague as a novel for outlining some similarities with the covid-19 phenomenon comes from the author's globalized perception and dimension of the future society. As Camorrino and Savona argue "epidemics are a constant in human history. This is perhaps the first one of a global character that has broken out in a world completely immersed in the media universe. Globalization played a key role in the social pandemic imaginary." [5]

The Scarlet Plague turns out to be one of the inaugural books of 20th century literature and the futuristic reality described by London is prophetic. It is important to focus on the fact that early 20th-century society was forced into a diplomatic and geopolitical scenario of global proportions by the threat of an impending world war, which was fueled by tremendous advancements in military, communications, and transportation technology. The First World War aided in the transition from the previous national imaginary to the new global imaginary by fostering the creation of shared experiences, fears, sufferings, and memories. In his visionary text, the author anticipates themes destined to become widespread in the following decades. The society depicted by London lives in a world capable of talking "through the air [...] thousands and thousands of miles" [7], where "airships in the air dirigibles and flying machines [...] could travel two hundred miles an hour" [7]; this globalized and interconnected perception emerges in the description of the spread of the virus:

"And the word came of a strange disease that had broken out in New York. There were seventeen millions of people living then in that noblest city of America. Nobody thought anything about the news. It was only a small thing. There had been only a few deaths. It seemed, though, that they had died very

the thickly they were packed, the more new kinds of germs became diseases. There were warnings. Soldervetzsky, as early as 1929, told the bacteriologists that they had no guarantee against some new disease, thousand times more deadly than any they knew, arising and killing by the hundreds of millions and even by the billion." [7] quickly, and one of the first signs of the disease was the turning red of the face and all the body. Within twenty-four hours came the report of the first case in Chicago. And on the same day, it was made public that London, the greatest city in the world, next to Chicago, had been secretly fighting the plague for two weeks and censoring the news des- patches that is, not permitting the word to go forth to the rest of the world that London had the plague. ut the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed anyhumanbody itentered." [7]

In his study titled Viral Heroism: *What the Rhetoric of Heroes in the COVID-19 Pandemic Tells Us About Medicine and Professional Identity*, P.D. Hopkins argues how "throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the use of the term "hero" has been widespread. This is especially common in the context of healthcare workers [...]". [11]

And again:

"New York City and Chicago were in chaos. And what happened with them was happening in all the large cities. [...] All railroads and vessels carrying food and such things into the great city had ceased running, and mobs of the hungry poor were pillaging the stores and warehouses. [...] For twenty-four hours, he said, no transatlantic airships had arrived, and no more messages were coming from England. He did state, though, that a message from Berlin—that's in Germany—announced that HoiFmeyer, a bacteriologist of the Metchnikoff School, had discovered the serum for the plague. That was the last word, to this day, that we of America ever received from Europe. [...] We can only conclude that what happened in America happened in Europe, and that, at the best, some several scores may have survived the Scarlet Death on that whole continent." [7]

Even if the reality depicted by London is far from what really happened during the 2020 pandemic, these lines could help to emphasize the global reach of an epidemic, indeed the author writes: "with the coming of the Scarlet Death the world fell apart, absolutely, irretrievably. Ten thousand years of culture and civilization passed in the twinkling of an eye, 'lapsed like foam' " [7].

The theme of isolation is another element that appears in London's book and which deserves reflection. Although it might be interesting to analyze this theme from a psychological point of view, the author decided not to pursue this route, but to use isolation as a means of emphasizing the social dynamics during a pandemic. Nevertheless, it is fascinating how the first description of the protagonist's isolation is very reminiscent of the first lockdown faced by contemporary society during the covid-19 spreading.

"I was alone in my big house. As I have told you often before, in those days we could talk with one another over wires or through the air. The telephone bell rang, and I found my brother talking to me. He told me that he was not coming home for fear of catching the plague from me, [...] he advised me to remain where I was, and wait to find out whether r not I had caught the plague. 'To all of this I agreed, staying in my house and for the first time in my life attempting to cook. [...] By means of the telephone I could talk with whomsoever I pleased and get the news. Also, there were the newspapers, and I ordered all of them to be thrown up to my door so that I could know what was happening with the rest of the world." [7]

Another unique element that is present both in the Scarlet Plague and in the Covid-19 pandemic's social imaginary is the glorification of the figures of doctors, researchers, and nurses who gave their lives for the salvation of mankind. The sentence chosen by London for describing the healthcare workers is "they were heroes" [7]

"as fast as they perished, others stepped forth and took their places. It was in London that they first isolated it. The news was telegraphed everywhere. Trask was the name of the man who succeeded in this, but within thirty hours he was dead. Then came the struggle in all the laboratories to find something that would kill the plague germs. All drugs failed." [7]

Alongside the *rhetoric of the heroes,* there is also the dilemma of fighting against an invisible and unknown enemy. Camorrino and Savona underline how, during the last pandemic, the virus "does not manifest itself to consciousness in the ceremonial garb of death, but in the frayed and unsettling robes of nothingness" [5], this is also emphasized by London:

"You was telling about germs, the things you can't see but which make men sick" Edwin prompted."Yes, that's where I was. A man did not notice at first when only a few of these germs got into his body. But each germ broke in half and became two germs, and they kept doing this very rapidly so that in a short time there were many millions of theminthebody. Thenthemanwassick. He had a disease, and the disease was named after the kind of a germ that was in him." [7]

This feature of the micro-world, the invisible, was used by London as an expedient for initiating a debate on the veracity of the existence of a pathogenic microorganism that caused the destruction of society.

"And you can't see these germ-things, Granser," Hare-Lip objected, "and here you gabble, gabble, gabble about them as if they was anything when they're nothing. At all. Anything you can't see, ain't, that's what. Fighting things that ain't with things that ain't! They must have been all fools in them days. That's why they croaked. I ain't goin' to believe in such rot, I tell you that." [7]

In this brief extract, London creates a generational and intellectual confrontation. The figure of the grandson embodies that of the outsider who believes many things that rationally do not exist, but who does not accept the scientific reality disclosed by his grandfather, a university professor, an example of the man who holds the knowledge. Hare-Lip embodies the figure of the conspiracy theorists who questions the reality of the facts through conjecture that has no scientific basis. This interesting and brief debate underlines how the phenomenon related to the issue of conspiracy is not just a social issue of the covid-19 pandemic. It is part of human nature to ask questions, and London gives an example of this. It is peculiar how human nature remains unchanged over time. A similar dynamic occurred during the recent pandemic, when the scientific debate was first exposed in the media and members of the same scientific community positioned themselves on even opposing sides, sharing controversial ideas and contributing to the deconstruction of science's authority, which was perceived as fallible and fragmented by the majority of the people.

IV. CONCLUSION

Summing up, it is possible to assert that the study of literature from a sociological point of view helps to better understand the relationship that exists between artistic and social agents; the analysis of the writer's imaginative's capacity becomes one of the ways to understand not only his subjective perspective but also the social dimension in which he is placed. London's *The Scarlet Plague* is not only a science fiction novel but rather a profound analysis of human nature in the face of a potential end of civilization. The confrontation with the covid-19 pandemic lays bare the fragilities of the human ego and the social and moral dynamics that are bound to resurface in contemporary society. It could almost border on a warning in which the author does nothing but alert the reader to the cyclical nature of historical events. The fate and condemnation of those who do not remember the past is to replicate it, while at the same time the condemnation of those who do remember is to see the same phenomena replicated again without being able to prevent it.

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[16]   "The sociological imagination is becoming, I believe, the major common denominator of our cultural life and its signal feature. This quality of mind is found in the social and psychological sciences, but it goes far beyond these studies as we now know them. Its acquisition by individuals and by the cultural community at large is slow and often fumbling; many social scientists are themselves quite unaware of it." [12]

[17]   It is interesting also to focus on the C. Taylor's vision of social imaginary as: "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are nor-mally met, and the deeper normative notions and images thatunderlie these expectations.There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because myfocus is on the way ordinary people ''imagine'' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (iii)

the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy." [13]

[18]   It is suggested the reading the scientific paper titled *Schizophrenia and Influenza at the Centenary of the 1918-1919 Spanish Influenza Pandemic: Mechanisms of Psychosis Risk* for a better understanding of the associations between influenza infection and psychosis. [14]

[19]   London blames also the phenomenon of overcrowding, the phenomenon of overcrowding, which is also one of the plagues that afflict contemporary society: "In spite of all these diseases, and of all the new ones that continued to arise, there were more and more men in the world. This was because it was easy to get food. The easier it was to get food, the more men there were; the more men there were, the more thickly were they packed together on the earth; and the more thickly they were packed, the more new kinds of germs became diseases. There were warnings. Soldervetzsky, as early as 1929, told the bacteriologists that they had no guarantee against some new disease, thousand times more deadly than any they knew, arising and killing by the hundreds of millions and even by the billion." [7]

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