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## Living the Moment during Pandemics with Reference to Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

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### ABSTRACT

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals have been forced to cope with high stress, fear, and anxiety, focusing on living in the moment as a way of coping. The current COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences on social, economic and political levels. Applying the narrative analysis methodology, the study here interprets the story in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* and draws a comparison between today's global pandemic and that in the novel. It examines the vulnerability of humans, community and civilization. It also emphasizes how both pandemics caused great panic among people destabilizing their normal ways of living and exposing the fragility of life. *The Scarlet Plague* has been published in 1910 more than one hundred years ago reminding us that another pandemic is likely to appear in the future. Hence, the researcher suggests executing further studies on how pandemics modify human behavior and effects them.

**Keywords:** *Scarlet Plague, Covid 19, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Jack London*

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### 1. Introduction

In the novel, *The Scarlet Plague*, Jack London demonstrate that pandemics originate from disease-causing germs, which consequently infect several people resulting in the death of millions of people. Upon the spread of a pandemic and its ravaging nature, most people are grief-stricken and confused on the next course action that can be taken to minimize the impact of the disease on themselves and their beloveds. Mostly, individuals are gripped with the fear that they may become victims of the contagion (Rosoff et al., 2012).

The current COVID-19 pandemic has elicited great anxiety with people mostly paranoid about contracting the disease. Given the strange manner in which pandemics manifest, as exemplified by *The Scarlet Plague*, there was lack of preparation and confusion. Fear and uncertainty among the people was also evident with the COVID-19 and compounded by the apparent lack of cure leading to policies promoting social distancing, lockdowns and movement restrictions. In *The Scarlet Plague*, Jack London explores the experiences of people during a pandemic, reflecting on its socio-economic and cultural impact. Moreover, London focuses on the people's behavioral

aspects during pandemics including irrationality, selfishness, and fear in a society that had previously been civilized. "The fleeting systems lapse like foam...All man's toil upon the planet was just so much foam" (London, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, the study aims to analyze how people live the moment during pandemics with reference to Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*.

The narrative analysis methodology will therefore facilitate an in-depth understanding of the literary research of *The Scarlet Plague* in the current context of how pandemics influence normal human living. The literature include journal articles and books written and published in English covering the period from 2010 to 2020. The paper involves a review analyzing how individuals live during a pandemic based on the COVID-19 and examining it against *The Scarlet Plague* by Jack London.

### 2. Discussion

*The Scarlet Plague* provides a fictional account of a pandemic that claimed the lives of many people much like what COVID-19 is doing currently since it broke out in 2019. There are several instances where the scarlet plague shares a lot of similarity with COVID-19 in that both pandemics have resulted in the decimation

of the human populations with individuals left to struggle for bare survival. Coincidentally, the setting of the novel in 2013, when the scarlet plague hit the world depicts London's prophecy of a viral disease that would impoverish humankind six years later in the form of the coronavirus pandemic. "The Scarlet Death came in 2013. Lord! Lord! \_ think of it! Sixty years ago, and I am the only person alive to-day that lived in those times" (London, 2018, p. 3). Imperatively, from the onset, the author informs readers of the devastation caused by the scarlet plague and how Professor James Howard Smith, hereafter referred to as Granser, was the sole survivor of the pandemic while most of his contemporaries died. Han et al, (2020) observe that several lives have been lost to the COVID-19 pandemic, a respiratory illness that kills quickly much like the scarlet plague. Furthermore, the scarlet plague disrupted the routine way of life and people had to adjust to the *new-normal* similarly that COVID-19 has forced people to amend their lifestyles. "Covid 19 presents a unique social and economic challenge...The social and economic landscape has drastically changed in the last few months" (Bashir et al., 2020, p. 1406).

In the novel, *The Scarlet Plague*, Granser is an English professor at the University of California, who has been reduced to abject poverty and squalid living conditions. According to Jones, the onset of pandemics is mostly sudden and unanticipated as witnessed with the first casualties of COVID-19, leading to confusion and disruption of usual lifestyle activities. "Epidemics put pressure on the societies they strike. This strain makes visible latent structures that might not otherwise be evident" (2020, p.1682). Thus, Granser and his generation were caught unprepared leading to most of his contemporaries perishing from the scarlet plague. COVID-19 that broke out and within days had become a global pandemic is a memorial of London's *The Scarlet Plague*, which Granser describes as catastrophic and that people, "by Thursday were dying like flies everywhere ... in their beds, at their work, walking along the street" (London, 2018, p. 23).

According to Granser, the onset of the pandemic was marked with an initial calmness, as people perceived as such a small thing leading them to remain skeptical of the consequences. Individuals at the beginning seemed not to be alarmed and

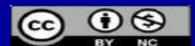
were confident that bacteriologists would identify ways of killing the pathogens just like they have in the past.

The word came of a strange disease that had broken out in New York...Nobody thought anything about the news. It was only a small thing. There had been only a few deaths...It looked serious, but we in California, like everywhere else, were not alarmed. We were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past (London, 2018, p. 21).

Initial endemics are often viewed as less threatening until the virus gets to catastrophic levels on a global scale as witnessed with the scarlet plague and COVID-19. Moreover, the sudden onset of pandemics is difficult to relieve because professionals expected to intervene are mostly clueless on how to intervene. London (2018) highlights that bacteriologists who had been successful in finding a cure for previous pandemics could do nothing to help eradicate the scarlet plague. Correspondingly, the emergence of COVID-19 was characterized by lack of appropriate interventions as doctors advised people on preventive measures while being hard-pressed to explain the origins of the virus and finding a cure. Granser, at first, witnessed a casualty at the university where he taught. However, when a young woman died shortly after showing symptoms of the disease and the scarlet plague hit the University. Students and lecturers started to run away from an inevitable fate. According to London, the initial casualties who died in the university premises triggered further fear among the students who remained oblivious of the scarlet plague, but only fearing for their lives. To put the devastating nature of *The Scarlet Plague* pandemic into context, Granser states that the disease destroyed human beings within moments of entering the body, a situation that increased anxiety and stress among the people who could no longer live normally.

It was on Tuesday that I saw my first death...One of my students...her face... had suddenly turned scarlet...In fifteen minutes, by the clock- I timed it- she was dead, there, in my own classroom, dead. And from the first sign of the plague to her death only fifteen minutes elapsed. That will show you how swift was the Scarlet Death (London, 2018, p. 23).

The outbreak of the scarlet plague is reminiscent of COVID-19 when it first broke out in China. Jozaghi and Dahya (2020) draw similar parallels between COVID-19 and other pandemics by suggesting that when they occur, the disease



tend to progress and spread rapidly among the populations as it becomes more evident that the plague is uncontrollable causing people to panic. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in late 2019 and its devastating consequence started to come to the surface, the world came to a standstill as people feared death. The narrator indicates a similar fear of death in London's "*The Scarlet Plague*" and states that New York and Chicago were in a great state of pandemonium due to the poor management of the pandemic, which resulted in numerous casualties and further spread of the disease. "New York city and Chicago were in chaos... A third of the new York police were dead...All law and order has ceased" (London, 2018, p. 25).

Both COVID-19 and the Scarlet Plague can be seen as diseases that festered beyond people's imaginations because of the lack of appropriate response to mitigate its consequences. London suggests that before the calamity of the viral scarlet plague, people lived, enjoyed ordinary lives, and had no worry of the emergence of the news that there was a pandemic because of overconfidence in existing healthcare institutions. They were less perturbed because of the false sense of belief that they had the best bacteriologists in California who could soon find an alternative in overcoming the new germ. Similarly, individuals initially dismissed COVID-19 as mild flu, which they could easily manage provided they had stronger immunities. "History suggests that we are actually at much greater risk of exaggerated fears and misplaced priorities. There are many historical examples of panic about epidemics that never materialized...while ignoring much larger ones hidden in plain sight" (Jones, 2020, p. 1683). Regardless of the ravaging nature of both COVID-19 and the Scarlet Plague, the public still had a false sense of hope that scientists would reach a therapeutic intervention and were highly confident in their efforts to find a vaccine for the virus. Therefore, lack of awareness in both the COVID-19 and the scarlet plague pandemics contributed in making millions of people undermine the nature of the highly viral infection they were dealing with. The fact that there was no significant approach to cure the disease as it continued to kill whomever it entered compounded the misery of the people. The testimony of Granser who suggest that *The Scarlet Plague* was much worse than Asiatic cholera is further evidence of the viral nature of the

disease (London, 2018, p. 21). Several bacteriologists attempted to introduce proper vaccines in each of the highlighted pandemics without significant success because of the invisibility of microorganisms and the unique nature of the viruses, which further increases the anxiety among people. "The defeat of the science and medicine in which the people had placed trust generated fear in the population" (Riva et al., 2014, p. 1754).

In furtherance, the spread of COVID-19 led to widespread rumors leading to people relying on false information, prompting government establishments to control misinformation. "Misinformation...may fill in gaps in public understanding, and those distrustful of their government or political elites may be disinclined to trust official communications on these matters" (Brennen et al., 2020, p. 6). In *The Scarlet Plague* London shows how misinformation created anxiety, stress and depression because those that had received news that they were infected or were about to die could degenerate into a state of hallucination. Hence, it required immediate action from the censorship of information to reduce exaggeration, the spread of rumors, myths and misconceptions that increased panic among people.

Imperatively, suspicions became a way of life as Granser narrates that everyone suspected of being infected was isolated and left to die. Discrimination and intolerance for the infected individuals resulted in numerous murders.

It was here that I saw for the first time what I was soon to see so often. One of the marching men had suddenly shown the unmistakable mark of the plague. Immediately those about him drew away, and he, without a remonstrance stepped out of his place to let them pass on...A woman attempted to follow him...others laid hands on her and restrained her from following him (London, 2018, p. 31).

The author highlights that the onset of the pandemic changed people into savages as individuals became more aggressive and violent. Consequently, life was lived in a panic mode as people had little consideration for others and "civilization was passing in a sheet of flame and a breath of death" (London, 2018, p. 33). The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed that when human beings are stretched beyond their limit then there is a high possibility that conflicts arise creating further chaos.

Millions of people panicked after realizing the quickness with which the

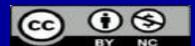
germs spread, killing humans, within the shortest time after infection. The infected people's faces would turn red before experiencing organ failure within the hour. London provides details on how the illness manifested and how people reacted negatively to the information that they would die. Similarly, the emergence of COVID-19 resulted in people developing mistrust for health institutions because of the fear of quarantine and the cost associated with lengthy hospital stays. Consequently, when individuals suspected of having either scarlet plague or COVID-19, they became more defensive as they feared stigmatization and social discrimination. Moreover, the lack of necessary interventions such as the use of facemasks, mechanical ventilators in hospitals, sanitizers and other necessary supplies has led people to avoid testing for COVID-19 in fear of being infected. Imperatively, the fact that most people cannot afford hospital treatment implies that they have to rely on their immunities. However, immunological strengths is not a sure guarantee as both the scarlet plague and COVID-19 have demonstrated to eliminate even the strongest individuals resulting in death. Similar experiences are observed in *The Scarlet Plague* where people become more obsessed with living, by all means necessary, hence avoiding any form of contact with those that have been infected. Additionally, people developed resistance to measures meant to limit the spread of COVID-19. Restrictive measures such as isolation resulted in more depression among populations. According to London, human reactions to the plague revealed a highly traumatized population that lost every form of decency in them and became paranoid savages, a common fear of death and infections being observed in all pandemics. In the current era of COVID-19, there is a general fear of death, uncertainty, and high anxiety levels as individuals try to cope with living.

A pandemic outbreak leads to the overstretching of public utilities as observed in London's *The Scarlet Plague* where hospitals were overwhelmed as with the current COVID-19. Therefore, "quarantine and other public health practices are effective and valuable ways to control communicable disease outbreaks and public anxiety" (Tognotti, 2013, p. 258). And so, pandemics not only bring forth fears, but also result in modified human behavior. Public confidence has been eroded in existing institutions because all systems

have failed including government and non-governmental agencies that are mandated to take care of the victims. People, services and the media that provides knowledge to the general need health literacy (Paakkan & Okan, 2020). As a matter of survival, some individuals live depending on instincts as most government agencies have left them to their own devices. Thus, the public consider healthcare professionals and researchers as heroes who can end illness. People today and those in London's novel, place their trust in scientists rather than some political structures that are partly ineffective in managing the pandemics.

Given their roles as frontline healthcare workers, bacteriologist, doctors, and nurses particularly became overwhelmed as they were also ravaged by the pandemic and its terrifying results. Consequently, governments issued various public health policies that aimed to limit the spread of the virus. Part of the non-therapeutic measures included social distancing. Therefore, friends and families cut social ties, as they could no longer interact freely in events or gatherings. Imperatively, people have stopped going to social events such as weddings, outings, and even watching live games because of the social distancing enforcements, which require that individuals restrict movement as much as possible. Moreover, governments forced people to wear masks, which soon became an unpopular social practice with mass protests witnessed in some countries where several individuals felt that their rights were violated.

The resulting impact of social distance has necessitated the use of technology to bridge the gap between individuals. People can engage through communication technologies such as Zoom, Google Talk and Skype, which are alternative means. Still, pandemics have put social ties such as friendships and relationships under considerable strain leading to their breakage. "People are now beginning to recognize a new phenomenon: tiredness, anxiety or worry resulting from overusing virtual...platforms" (Wiederhold, 2020, p. 437). As time passed, people have become tired of such policies demanding that they have every right to associate with friends and family without restrictions of any nature. Granser in *The Scarlet Plague* has reflected all this, as the infected were heavily discriminated against and because of their condition, their uninfected counterparts killed them to prevent spreading the disease.



Therefore, Granser states that he strove to create for himself and his relatives a haven at the Chemistry Building in the University with adequate provisions to prevent them from coming into contact with those that were infected. "A large quantity of provisions have been gathered...A number of committees were appointed, and we developed a very efficient organization" (London, 2018, p. 32).

The occurrence of pandemics destroys other routine activities such as education as summarized by the case of Granser in *The Scarlet Plague*, who was formerly a professor of literature. The occurrence of the scarlet plague led to the closure of the university since several students scampered for safety and deserted lecture rooms. Nowadays with the spread of COVID-19, educational systems across the globe have been affected leading to the shutdown of schools and universities as a containment measure to avoid the spread of the pandemic and consequently killing students. Without attending schools, students struggled with limited access to educational materials from homes turning mostly to online learning where teachers have continued providing instructions to them.

The pandemic also impacted significantly religious activities, for individuals could no longer gather. Consequently, there was a widespread cancellation of worshipping events. However, despite the cancellation of such activities, most religious organizations contributed to the efforts of controlling the pandemic by providing medical supplies and food aid to the worst affected areas globally with adherents urged to continue praying and contributing to the less fortunate in society.

London, in his novel, *The Scarlet Plague*, illustrates that the pandemic led to the breaking down of several governmental and non-governmental institutions that led to their inability to combat the large-scale outbreak of disease as witnessed with the Coronavirus. When it broke out, most countries were unprepared to handle the high number of casualties and the devastating effects of the pandemic on the economies. The worst hit countries were in the developing part of the world that had to struggle with basic supplies such as masks and hand sanitizers. In *The Scarlet Plague*, Granser indicates how his country was vulnerable similar to what is currently

witnessed with COVID-19 which has made nations rely on the goodwill of others.

Therefore, several families realized they could no longer sustain the same level of living. They had to cut costs and maintain frugality to avoid running out of supplies. Most people in the worst affected regions watched their business rundown with no customers to buy things from them for inflation and cost of living increased making the prices of basic commodities go up significantly. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted normal living as manifested in businesses ceasing operations and retrenching employees as the fight for survival proved extremely difficult to sustain. London attests to the fact that since there was no law, people tended to be wild and unmanageable creating conflicts. Gun holders discharge their automatic firearms at the slightest provocation. A great conflict emerged between those that were well and those that had the contagion resulting in civil strife as individuals discharged fusillades from their pistols during the fight to drive out the sick. "A man – why and how- I do not know was killed on the sidewalk in front of the house" (2018, p.28). Still, the severe shortage of food supplies forced people to scramble into stores and buy basic needs. In some instances, individuals violently broke into stores leading to an increase in criminal activities and people willing to sacrifice their lives to acquire basic supplies for their households, yet could not afford it. Pandemics create fear and extreme worry about one's health and that of their loved ones, besides the financial implications and loss of support services (Jedwab et al., 2019). Most people became self-obsessed with amassing and hoarding food provisions as the poor plundered whatever resources they could find.

Due to the pressure, individuals have been facing mental health, either directly or indirectly. Several psychosocial issues emerged because of the pandemic with people becoming highly paranoid and doubtful of each other fearing that they could contract the virus from friends, relatives and even pets. According to Zarghami, many people experienced the five psychological stages of shock, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance during Covid 19 (2020). Suicide rates also increased as exacerbated by social isolation when the government imposed quarantine and social distancing were mandatory. In addition, the high rates of unemployment,

when various companies closed down lead to financial constraints in families leading to several breadwinners committing suicide. “Economic unevenness and increasing inequality are bound to create feelings of being ‘left behind’ which then lead to social unrest” (Tubadji et al., 2020, p. 54). In *The Scarlet Plague*, Granser observed that the pandemic was a period of uncontrollable apathy as people no longer felt the pain of the dying since countless millions and billions of humans were killed. “A man’s heart turned to iron aimed such scenes, and one heard all too many appeals for help” (London, 2018, p. 30).

The occurrence of the scarlet plague pandemic as told by London in his novel *The Scarlet Plague* impoverished humanity resulting in several deaths and destroying economy leading to unstable political climates. The devastating effects of it were so massive that it swept across the entire continent of Europe with people mostly unable to control the outbreak. “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’” (London, 2018, p. 27). In recent human history, there has never been other equally dangerous pandemics such as the bubonic plague, scarlet plague, and the black plague until the most recent occurrence of the coronavirus. While London’s *The Scarlet Plague*, published a century ago, it is a representation and a reflection of concerns faced today, and the success of the novel and the literary tops focusing on the plague demonstrates this.

### 3. Sum Up

With the COVID-19 virus, London’s novel similar theme is brought to the fore as it focuses on cultural and social apprehension of loss due to a mysterious and highly infectious plague. The coronavirus pandemic has created great anxiety with the affected people suffering extensive trauma bringing into question how much humans can cope with uncertainty and their attempts to deal with the deeply rooted fears about death and extinction. Reeskens et al. suggests, “that values socialized at a young age are stable within individuals over time; by contrast opinions are expected to be more volatile as they are a reflection of current conditions” (2020, p.1). London’s, *The Scarlet Plague* provides modern readers with a reflection on the worldwide consequences of pandemics as a further testament of why the current COVID-19 is

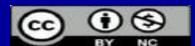
similar to the plague. Hence, scholars could explore the aftermath of pandemics and their effects on both humans and the globe in further studies as predicted that other pandemics are likely to occur in the future emphasizing this need.

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**Dr. Nouf Abdulhamed Alkhattabi** obtained her Ph.D. in English Literature (Fiction) from The College of Arts and Humanities at King Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2010. Currently, she is working as an assistant professor in English with the Department of English Language and is also serving as the Dean of College of Languages and Translation, Jeddah University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. She has twenty years of teaching experience. She has also authored a book- *The Struggle for Survival in the Novels of Toni Morrison: A Study in Psycho-narration*. She has also published various research articles in esteemed international journals.

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