Pandemic Literature: Echoes of Survival in Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*

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***Abstract*—Survival is a fundamental aspect of human existence, encompassing biological, psychological, and environmental challenges. It extends beyond mere physical endurance and has been a prominent literary theme across cultures and historical periods. In extreme circumstances such as pandemics, literary depictions of survival reflect human adaptability and complex moral and ethical dilemmas. Pandemics serve as existential catalysts that force individuals to confront absurdity and meaninglessness. Amidst outbreaks when global communities are engaged with unprecedented challenges, literature becomes a means of documenting experiences, questioning existing societal structures and exploring emotional and philosophical survival implications. This work aims to demonstrate how crisis narratives in Jack London's novel *The Scarlet Plague* shape an understanding of human tenacity, vulnerability and hope. By analyzing the protagonist's journey and his confrontation with the chaotic remnants of human society, this study investigates how London's novel engages with existential inquiries regarding human instincts and their will to survive in a world where traditional structures of meaning have disintegrated. It further explores the multifaceted dimensions of existentialism amidst suffering, examining its historical and contemporary meanings, and analyzing how societies have adapted to pandemic conditions.**

***Index Terms*— Crisis, existentialism, literature, pandemic, survival**

Introduction:

If you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how.
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1997:6)

Survival is a fundamental aspect of human existence, shaped by biological instincts, environmental conditions, and learned behaviours. Throughout their lifespan, humans and other species have developed strategies to endure harsh environments, overcome threats and adapt to changing scenarios. Whether in the wilderness or critical situations such as during natural calamities or disasters survival depends on a combination of physical resilience, psychological strength, and resourcefulness. In a world where pandemics and existential crises often intersect, literature offers a different perspective to explore survival and identity. The literary genre probes these dimensions by presenting nuanced portrayals of individuals and societies manoeuvring through existential threats. Human history tells us that pandemics are nothing new, and they have been the inspiration for many a nightmare in literature. Dr Smeetaa Wanjarri in the preface to her book *Pandemic Literature* (2022) defined a pandemic as, "an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people" (Wanjarri 3). These outbreaks have long been a source of literary inspiration that shapes narratives and explores the understanding of human suffering. Although it is the only certainty in life, encountering the prospect of the destruction of the human species is frightening. While expressing fears of disease and societal collapse, literature also highlights the possibility of revival as well. Interpreting the influence of literature, Tyler Stowell in his article 'How Literature Can Capture the Essence of Life in a Pandemic' (2020), mentions, "If history illustrates the effect of pandemics on the whole communities, then literature gives us a more intimate view" (Stowell). The literature emerging from the pandemic serves as a testament to the human being's capacity to find purpose and navigate the complexities of existence, even amid a devastating crisis.

Crisis as it manifests itself affects both living beings and their social environments through extreme peril and distress. Throughout ages pandemic crises have emerged causing widespread infectious disease outbreaks to afflict multiple populations. These outbreaks across various periods have reshaped communities permanently as they impacted cultural developments alongside driving vital medical progress.

The term is commonly associated with widespread diseases that have the potential to cause significant illness, mortality, and societal disruption. It is generally caused by infectious agents such as viruses or bacteria that are capable of human-to-human transmission. Literature emerging from pandemic situations creates distinctive opportunities for writers to examine existential elements which emerge when uncertainty becomes prevalent. People turn to earlier literary accounts of pandemics to learn from previously written experiences. From medieval accounts of the Black Death to contemporary portrayals of Covid-19, pandemic literature provides insights into the ways individuals and societies navigate crises. Mentioning Pandemic Literature Dr Wanjarri adds, "It combines both abstract thoughts with the concrete forms and presents subjects like alienation and assimilation in society but also reflects the issues such as social, political, and historical facts" (Wanjarri 1). In the course of humanity, literary works have reflected and critiqued the social, political, and emotional turmoil wrought by disease outbreaks. From Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which portrays the psychological and social upheaval of the Black Death, to Albert Camus' *The Plague*, which explores existentialism and human solidarity, pandemics have been central to literary discourse. These works not only document historical realities but also provide allegorical interpretations of human suffering. Pandemic narratives serve as a rich canvas for the exploration of existentialist themes; authors delve into the intricacies of human existence, probing the depths of individual consciousness in the face of mortality. Despite the devastation of pandemics and other stressful events, S. Jones (2020) believes that well-written literature can complement philosophical texts and help people gain a better sense of living regarding widespread disease. (Jones)

A pandemic story is a story of disease itself. Writers throughout time have attempted to record and understand pandemic events while illuminating physical and psychological human afflictions. Authors create meaningful narratives which serve historical purposes by presenting ethical musings as well as original concepts that help societies overcome the challenges of diseases and recovery. Since the Black Death ravaged the medieval period humanity has experienced numerous pandemics which continue to shape literary history through many literary works one such being *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London. In the realm of pandemic literature, Jack London's book stands out as a powerful exploration of human resilience and the fragile nature of civilization. London explored the mainstream worries of the pandemic by combining information on mortality patterns with clinical features of contagious disease. In his novel, London employs the framework of his characters' journey through this new reality to examine existential queries that probe the essence of human meaning and the certainty of death. *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), though written over a century ago, presents an eerily relevant portrayal of an infected civilization which displays the precarious nature of human society. The narrative of the novel is set in a future where humanity is on the brink of extinction and highlights the individual's struggle to find meaning in a society unravelling due to catastrophic disease. The novel follows the experiences of James Howard Smith, the last surviving member of a once-thriving society. The story unfolds in the year 2073 as a devastated America following the Red Death pandemic of 2013 that also decimated human populations sixty years ago. One of the few survivors, James Howard Smith, alias 'Granser,' tells his grandsons how the pandemic spread in the world and about the reactions of the people to contagion and death as he recounts the downfall of civilization caused by the pandemic that wipes out most of humanity. This dystopian scenario not only sheds light on the fragility of social and cultural structures but also the psychological toll of survival in a post-apocalyptic world. London's book presents a bleak vision of survival where traditional societal structures have collapsed, and human beings are forced to confront the rawness of existence in isolation.

The narrative foundation of the story takes place among untamed tribal territories in the San Francisco Bay Area. Smith remains among the few pre-pandemic survivors who recall the sudden onset of the Scarlet Plague which killed people instantly as it swept across 2013. After the plague broke out it caused the complete failure of societal frameworks alongside technological progress and institutions of knowledge while forcing people into isolated tribal clusters that only knew basic survival techniques. Through his account, Smith describes how the plague's first impact consisted of massive fatalities followed by social destabilization and the emergence of disorder and lawlessness. He reflects on how civilization, once defined by art, science, and intellectual progress, was obliterated in a matter of days. There is a sense of levity at the very beginning of the novel as the people seem unaware of the impact of the new plague outbreak. As London wrote,

We were sure that the bacteriologists would find a way to overcome this new germ, just as they had overcome other germs in the past. But the trouble was the astonishing quickness with which this germ destroyed human beings, and the fact that it inevitably killed any human body it entered...But this new plague was quicker than that—much quicker. (London 24).

London's book functions as a tale of warning while exploring philosophical themes about how easily human advancement can crumble. The story brings forth the fundamental questions of survival while exposing the

recurring patterns of human civilization. Ultimately, *The Scarlet Plague* examines how even advanced civilizations can fall victim to pandemics. London's portrayal of the post-pandemic world is filled with existential despair, as characters struggle with the stark realities of their mortality and the breakdown of familiar societal constructs. Smith recounts the plague's devastation and his own survival while reflecting on absurdity of human existence, the inevitability of death, and the struggle to find meaning in a world devoid of its former certainties.

The novel critiques the illusion of human dominance over nature, illustrating how quickly civilization can regress when faced with an uncontrollable biological threat. Unlike many pandemic novels, *The Scarlet Plague* is primarily concerned with what comes after the fall where survivors have lost access to knowledge, language, and technology. London contrasts the pre-pandemic intellectual elite, represented by James Howard Smith, with the post-pandemic survivors, whose existence is defined by instinct and violence. The novel's regression underscores the bleak vision of humanity as human beings descend into a primitive hegemony where strength dominates over intelligence after the social structures collapse. The novel demonstrates clear existentialist beliefs by showing the apathetic universe and the difficulties people face when searching for meaning in the aftermath of catastrophe. Smith's memories of pre-pandemic civilization contrast starkly with the primitive, anarchic reality of the present. As mentioned in the novel, "All the world is topsy-turvy, and it has been topsy-turvy ever since the plague" (London 64). Smith's nostalgia for a lost world is contrasted with the ignorance and indifference of his grandsons, who see little value in his story and are unable to comprehend the sophistication of the past, "the old man was already maundering about disrespect for elders and the reversion to cruelty of all humans that fall from high culture to primitive conditions" (London 14). Smith's attempts to educate his grandsons about the past are met with disinterest, reflecting the futility of preserving knowledge in a world where survival is the only priority. The novel offers a pessimistic perspective where civilization's loss appears irreversible, and Smith's stories may ultimately be forgotten. Smith recounts, "Civilization was crumbling, and it was each for himself" (London 35). In Literature and reality as well, human reactions to plague can differ, but still the fear always remains of the end of one's life as well as civilization. In his article "What Jack London got right about COVID-19" (2020), Joe Matthews mentions,

"The Scarlet Plague" explains aspects of human behavior in times of plague that have become all too familiar recently — from the enormous value of isolating yourself to the mass madness at grocery stores. But London's larger message was even more prescient: In pandemics, don't be distracted by saving buildings or jobs; prioritize saving as many humans as possible (Matthews).

As the world battles a pandemic, human civilization is battling against more than a simple pathogen. Apart from being an unprecedented health crisis, the pandemic has also led to collapse on numerous other fronts. One of the extremely alarming aspects is the cases of inhumanity and sheer cruelty by individuals towards their fellow sufferers, which leads to far-reaching complications in human society. The collapse of societal hierarchies and intellectual traditions, which the protagonist nostalgically recalls, underscores Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist notion that meaning is not inherent but rather constructed. Mentioning Existentialism in his work *Existentialism is Humanism* (2007), Sartre observes "man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre 22). It focuses on the idea that humans are responsible for defining their essence through their actions, not predetermined by nature, society, or a divine force. In *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), a deadly plague wipes out most of humanity and the survivors, including the protagonist, are left to rebuild society. Therefore, the survivors are forced into a position where they must define their existence and purpose like Sartre's notion of creating meaning from one's actions. Jack London's The Scarlet Plague (1912) is an important literary artefact that suggests that civilization's veneer of stability is illusory and that, when confronted with an existential crisis such as a pandemic, individuals are forced to grapple with the absurdity of their former values and aspirations. London's novel also presents an existential confrontation with death. *The Scarlet Plague* is unique in its exploration of existentialist philosophy, demonstrating the ephemeral nature of human constructs, the struggle with meaninglessness, and the inherent loneliness of existence. Existentialism is a school of thought that focuses on individual experience, freedom, and the quest for meaning in an absurd universe. Here, Survival is not just a physical but also a psychological and existential effort to preserve a sense of meaning in an antagonistic world. Existentialism delves into human vulnerability, solitude, and the quest for significance amid calamity.

London offers a haunting vision of the collapse of civilization, depicting the vulnerability of human society in the event of a devastating pandemic. The novel is set in a post-apocalyptic future when a lethal

plague has wiped out almost all of humanity, and the remnants of civilization devolve into primitive survivalism. The novel brings out the weakness of social institutions, showing how rapidly law, government, and cultural achievements crumble in the absence of stability. However, in a bleak view of the human condition, and civilization's impermanence, the few survivors are stripped of the constructs of society and revert to tribalism. Nevertheless, the novel also examines the toughness of the human spirit during this bleakness. This deeper existential struggle to keep meaning is found even in a world overrun by savagery even through Smith's insistence to pass down knowledge and retain meaning. The generational gap between Smith and his grandchildren, who dismiss his tales of the past as irrelevant, further reinforces the idea that survival alone is insufficient and must find a way to rebuild and redefine its existence. London's portrayal of civilization's fall and human endurance thus serves as both a cautionary tale and a philosophical inquiry into the essence of survival beyond mere existence.

London depicts a bleak future of a post-pandemic world where civilization breaks down, bringing humanity back to a primitive level. Such a dystopian scenario is true to actual pandemics like the Black Death, the Spanish Flu, and COVID-19, which have had a lasting impact on human societies, economies, and philosophies. The novel's portrayal of swift societal breakdown after the enigmatic 'Scarlet Death' is reflective of the fear and uncertainty felt during actual pandemics. For instance, the Black Death in the 14th century not only decimated populations but also led to drastic social and economic transformations, such as shortages of workers and challenging religious institutions which is much like the way survivors in London battle over the loss of intellectual and cultural knowledge. Similarly, the 1918 Spanish Flu, which happened only a couple of years after London's novel was out, caused disturbances to worldwide infrastructures and pointed to the vulnerability of modernity, similar to how the protagonist of the novel, James Howard Smith, laments the collapse of technological and scientific progress. Most contemporary, the COVID-19 pandemic has reminded many of these same existential issues, illustrating how pandemics reveal weaknesses in governance, medicine, and human interconnection. While *The Scarlet Plague* exaggerates the scale of civilization's downfall, its core themes which include social collapse, individual survival, and the search for meaning in a changed world remain strikingly relevant. COVID-19, much like London's fictional pandemic, raised pressing questions about resilience, human adaptability, and the role of knowledge preservation in times of crisis. Chelsea Haith in his article 'Pandemics from Homer to Stephen King: What We Can Learn from Literary History' (2020) observes, "Literature has a vital role to play in framing our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth turning to some of these texts to better understand our reactions and how we might mitigate racism, xenophobia and ableism- discrimination against anyone with disabilities- in the narratives that surround the spread of this Corona Virus". (Haith)

Ultimately, London's *The Scarlet Plague* enriches the field of pandemic literature by providing an existential critique of human civilization and showcasing the pillars of social order that are unstable and seek meaning in an endless, sometimes Sisyphean world. The focus of the novel on individual survival and resilience, together with its presentation of a world without traditional morality and order, positions it in line with existentialist philosophy that favours personal action and engagement with absurdity at the expense of dependence on preordained structures. As pandemics have historically served as moments of existential reckoning, *The Scarlet Plague* invites readers to reconsider the fragility of human institutions and the necessity of constructing meaning in an unpredictable and indifferent universe. According to the article, 'We Must Keep Our Humanity in the Time of Coronavirus' (2020) by Ibrahim Kalin, "This ordeal has the potential to bring us closer to one another or turn us into further strangers in an increasingly estranged world. The choices we will make now will shape not just the geopolitical system and the economy, but also the state of our humanity in the decades to come." (Kalin)

Conclusion:

Literature as a form of reclamation represents what illness symbolizes, that the world does not belong to us. Nature has the potential to alter everything. Since humans are a part of nature, it is absurd for them to evolve in a way that defies natural principles. Destroying nature is destroying mankind itself, and when humans do too much harm to nature, nature has its ways of reordering things. Throughout London's novel, humans are removed from the centre of existence on Earth, and nature returns to its natural state after being hit by a devastating outbreak. *The Scarlet Plague* resonates with the collective consciousness of survival in times of global crises. By analyzing the portrayal of human resilience, isolation, and societal collapse, this paper explores how London's work mirrors contemporary concerns about disease outbursts and survival. The psychological and moral dilemmas faced by the protagonist, James Howard, and other characters are examined as they navigate a world stripped of meaning and stability. By situating survival within a broader

literary and theoretical framework, literature articulates the human capacity to confront crisis, redefining resilience in times of global upheaval. In examining *The Scarlet Plague* through existential philosophy this research has underscored how Jack London's novel offers a vivid description of societal collapse, human survival, and the struggle for meaning amid catastrophe. By depicting the fragility of civilization, London demonstrates how major diseases can quickly devastate society, technology, and human knowledge. A precarious cultural progress is emphasized in the novel by the survivors' struggle to cope with the loss of history, language, and institutional memory. Additionally, London explores the existential crisis resulting from the pandemic through the protagonist, James Howard Smith, who finds himself trying to reconcile his pre-plague identity with a primitive, post-apocalyptic reality. Furthermore, this study highlights how humans respond to crises with existential dilemmas that remain constant throughout history. The novel's timeless relevance in pandemic literature is underscored by this research, which reinforces the idea that survival is not simply a physical struggle, but also an existential one, involving the search for meaning in the aftermath of a pandemic.

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