

August, 2020

Christ College Reading Groups 2020-2021

Topic: Plague Literature in a Century of Pandemic, 1919-2019

Dear Christ College Reading Alums,

Our last century has been bracketed by plague (using the word “plague” in its ancient sense of any widespread outbreak of disease). The influenza pandemic of 1918 to 1920 afflicted about a third of the world’s population and killed around fifty million people. The present COVID-19 pandemic began in 2019 and will continue at least into 2021, also afflicting millions, though the present projections are uncertain.

COVID-19 has already come to dominate the news as well many of our own conversations. And various writers have already begun to explore the question of what we can learn from plague literature across the centuries that might help us understand the present situation (an example of this kind of writing, an essay by Orhan Pamuk, will be one of the readings for the fifth discussion). Thus we have designed the syllabus for this year’s Christ College reading groups as a way of deepening and extending discussions already underway.

We try to accomplish this enrichment in three ways. We begin, in customary Christ College fashion, with classic texts from the ancient and early modern world. Second, after that introduction we restrict our focus to plague literature written during the last century. Third, while attending to matters that are under present scrutiny, we also introduce a set of considerations about plagues and plague literature that have been heretofore relatively ignored in public discourse, namely their relationship to Christian thought and practice.

One major advantage of these circumscriptions is that they enable us to think about plague literature during a century that also witnessed the cultural ascendancy of scientific authority (the century began with the completion of the thirty-year process that established modern research universities throughout this country) and to note the tensions between Christian understandings of plagues and medical/scientific understandings of them. How will we respond to conflicts between priests and pagan physicians in the readings? How will we compare the social and cultural responses that emerge from a seventeenth-century, dominantly Christian worldview in one novel to the responses that emerge from a mid-twentieth century, dominantly naturalistic worldview in another novel?

Another advantage involves opportunities to appraise the thoughts and actions of very different characters under profound stress through multiple lenses. How do we understand heroic actions when they stem from very different motivations? Do distinctions between the saved and the damned, the religious and the secular, the believer and the unbeliever, the righteous and the saint deepen or disappear during plague time? And do such distinctions seem helpful at all when we seek to understand how human beings care for one another in times of plague or at any other time?

In addition to creating urgent concern about specific matters of health and medicine, plagues also raise enduring questions that demand serious engagement beyond disease itself. While it’s true that instances of terrible illness appear in most of the texts we’ll explore, these texts also confront questions about suffering, healing, and community that are present in times of relative health. The literature we have selected would reward close reading and probing conversation even if our society were not presently in the grip of disease.

Answers to the questions that shape our discussions, especially about imaginative literature, will depend in part on what kind of literature we think plague narrative is exactly. In the first week, for example, it seems

clear that the account of the plague of Athens is a work of history, but what kind of literature is the account of the plagues of Egypt? In the second week, we would seem to be reading a work of historical fiction by contrast to the third week when we will read a work that was read by many in the years immediately after its publication as an allegorical treatment of Fascism. And we might well ask of both of these very different novels, set at very different times and places, whether they are not best understood as works of apocalyptic literature in the sense that they “unveil” or “reveal” certain truths about society, culture, religion, and human beings that are not as visible in ordinary times.

So what, we will wonder, do plagues reveal about the places, the societies, the cultures, the religions, and the human beings that suffer and endure them? And what has the present pandemic revealed about our own society and culture? Has it simply unveiled truths about us and our society that were always present but until now hidden from view? Or has it primarily created new tensions, conflicts, moral problems, and spiritual crises that were not present before 2019?

Our readings include two historical texts, a story from the Bible, a theological letter, two modern novels, a film, a documentary, a scientific article, and a filmed interview with one of the authors.

The first session’s readings remind us that devastating disease has a very long history and introduce some moral and theological frameworks for understanding its meanings. We’ll read a narrative that has informed Jewish and Christian imaginations about the provenance and moral weight of plagues across the centuries; consider a realistic account of an ancient city overcome by a plague; and think with an early modern pastor about the obligations Christians have to one another in times of virulent infection.

The Ten Plagues of Egypt, Exodus 7-12
Thucydides on the Great Plague of Athens
Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague”

For the second session, a recent work of historical fiction offers an imaginative portrait of life in an English village overcome by bubonic plague. This well-researched novel, which is based on the true story of the Derbyshire village of Eyam, whose residents chose to self-quarantine when struck with plague in 1665-66, explores themes of religion and science, class and community, fear and courage, and more.

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague* (2001)
Filmed interview with Geraldine Brooks

The third session features one of the greatest fictional and philosophical works of the mid-twentieth century. An outbreak of bubonic plague in a North African city provides the setting for several characters’ decisions about how to live when confronted with danger to themselves and the suffering of others. Both this novel and *Year of Wonders* feature pairs of sermons by clergymen who claim to see God’s hand in the crises gripping their communities.

Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1948)

The fourth session invites reflection upon the larger environmental context of past, present, and future pandemics. The viruses causing the present pandemic and other recent, dangerous outbreaks are *zoonotic*. Scientists have shown that their emergence is directly dependent on how human beings live with animals and on the land that sustains both animals and humans. Further, features of globalization promote the spread of disease. Finally, environmental damage like air pollution renders many especially vulnerable to pandemics

like the present one. We'll read an article summarizing this science and see a Hollywood film that portrays its consequences.

Ferris Jabr, "How Humanity Unleashed a Flood of New Diseases," *NYT Magazine* (June 17, 2020)
Contagion, directed by Stephen Soderbergh (2011)

The final session draws together and extends many of the inquiries undertaken in the first four sessions. It focuses upon the small French mountain village Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where Camus began writing *The Plague* in 1942 before abandoning that writing project for several years in order to join the French resistance. We will read some of the history of that village during the Nazi occupation, especially the heroic efforts of Andre Trocme, the pastor of a congregation of French Huguenots who saved 3,000 Jews. And we will watch a brilliant documentary of that village that was produced and directed by one of the Jews who was born in Le Chambon while being sheltered there. We will wonder again whether Camus's book is an allegory of Fascism. We will also consider again the questions of what plagues, whether biological like the bubonic plague or political like Nazism, reveal about human nature.

Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. Chapers II, XI, and XII (1994)

Orhan Pamuk, "What Great Pandemic Literature Has to Teach Us"

Weapons of the Spirit (1987) Classroom version (28 minutes); regular version (90 minutes)

We have provided background commentary interlaced with questions for each of the five sessions. As always with Christ College discussions, the study questions posed in advance simply serve to stimulate thought and to guide reading, rather than as an agenda for discussion sessions. On the contrary, we expect that each reading group will develop its own agenda and follow its own special interests and curiosities.

We assume as we write this that most of the discussion will take place on line through Zoom or some other platform. This does not compare to face-to-face encounters, of course, but it would permit our being able to listen in to selected discussions, which we would be eager to do if possible. Once you have determined the schedules and the discussion leaders, let the CC office know, and we will be in touch with you for possible participation. However, this is by no means an expectation. Many groups, we know, have developed over the years a great amount of confidence in one another and would not welcome intruders.

We wish all of you the best as you discuss these texts and ponder the questions they raise. We wish even more that you successfully navigate the present pandemic with minimal damage to you and your loved ones.

Blessings,

Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass