

## ***Neohelicon* Special Issue: Never Really Away from Us---Epidemics and Plagues in Literature**

Plague has always been with us throughout history and in literature. The first book of western literature, Homer's *Iliad*, starts with the story of a plague that strikes the Greek army at Troy. At the dawn of modernity, the characters of Boccaccio's *Decameron* try escape a plague in a rural estate and kill the time by telling stories. In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, death stalks blackly on the streets of London. These are probably among the most illuminating and terrifying pieces of plague literature. Camus's *The Plague* gives the topic a more modern tone on human destiny and condition. Thousands of years after Homer, plague is still with us now. Its comparative modern rarity only makes its mortality data all the more striking. H1N1, Ebola, SARS are all recent examples, and now there is a new one on the list--- the Novel Coronavirus pneumonia (COVID-19) that started in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, which quickly became a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC).

In her famous book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag points out how "feelings about evil are projected onto a disease. And the disease (so enriched by meanings) is projected onto the world" (58). This remark implies a complex relationship between the subject and the plagued world, whose nature has become even more constructed and imagined paradoxically in time of a real outbreak of plague nowadays when people heavily depend on social media to know what is going on in the world around them in a confined or even lockdown situation, a context when humanity is being tested not so much by the virus but by other humans. Existing scholarship, such as Jennifer Cooke's edited collection *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, often focuses on the metaphorical and cultural connotations of "plague", but plague in the literal sense, either in fiction or in reality, is never really away from us. It imposes a site full of tension, ethical responsibility and decision, paranoid, community belonging/disintegration to people in the infected area without preparation. It is social as well as individual. Though these keywords have been discussed in their own right individually by literary critics, they have never been so intensely intertwined together elsewhere as in the (fictional) event of a plague. Texts on plague and their contexts are open to many critical and interpretative possibilities.

This special issue of *Neohelicon* invites scholars from around the world to contribute to the critical discussion of literature about real epidemics and plagues, either contemporary or historical. It welcomes scholars to discuss the topic from interdisciplinary perspectives. Possible areas of investigation may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Psychoanalysis of plague literature
- Cognitive perspective on plague literature, including cognitive narratology, cognitive stylistics, cognitive map, possible worlds, and other branches of literary cognitive studies
- Ethical implications of plague literature, including moral responsibilities, moral judgments, etc.
- Daily reality as imagined, constructed, and mediated that have surfaced and become more manifest in the context of a plague
- Discourse and identity changes/crisis in the context of a plague

- Ecocriticism or ecofeminist perspective that discusses the threat of new epidemics caused by the melting of the permafrost
- Comparative studies of plague literature from different nations and cultures, and of plague literature as world literature
- The changing tradition of plague literature: traditions and modern concerns/variations with the advent of new virus, new technology and new social conditions
- Apocalypse in plague literature
- Epidemics in science fiction
- Knowledge as power in plague literature, and modern discourse of science in plague literature
- Medicine and literature: medical discourse, medical knowledge and medical propaganda
- Aesthetics of plague literature: why we want to read them?
- Sociology of plague literature: the production, consumption and promotion of plague literature and their role in the public and their public reception

**Guest editor:** Professor Haifeng Hui (Huazhong University of Science and Technology, China)

Please send your abstract to the guest editor (huihf@hust.edu.cn) by 1 May 2020. Email subject: "Neohelicon Special Issue--- Epidemics and Plagues in Literature." The submission should include an abstract of no more than 300 words, a brief bio (c. 100 words) and 3-5 key words. We will send notifications of abstract acceptance before 15 May 2020.

**About the journal:** *Neohelicon* (Acta comparationis litterarum universarum), is published by Springer [and Akadémiai Kiadó](#). *Neohelicon* welcomes studies on all aspects of comparative and world literature, critical theory and practice. In the discussion of literary historical topics (including literary movements, epochs, or regions), analytical contributions based on a solidly-anchored methodology are preferred.

URL: <https://www.springer.com/journal/11059>

**Schedule:**

Abstract submission deadline: 1 May 2020

Decision on abstract acceptance: 15 May 2020

Full paper submission deadline: 1 November 2020

Peer reviewing and revisions: November 2020 to May 2021

**Works Cited:**

Kousoulis, Antonis A. et al. "The Plague of Thebes, a Historical Epidemic in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 18.1 (2012): 153-57.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.