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**An Analysis of the Poetry of Past Pandemics  
Through the Perspective of Today's COVID-19 Times**

**NOM DE L'ESTUDIANT: Oscar Navarro Miranda**

**NOM DEL TUTOR: William Charles Phillips Mockford**

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UNIVERSITAT DE  
BARCELONA

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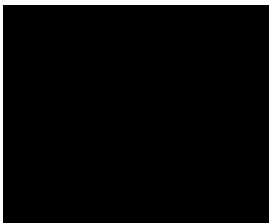


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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to analyse and compare the connections between the experience of those who lived during past pandemics, epidemics, and notable diseases to what we are currently experiencing with today's COVID-19 pandemic by analysing and interpreting their poetry and our news and collective experience. The analysis of the poems from Lucretius, Nashe, Montagu, Little, Young and Dixon, clearly shows that what our ancestors experienced centuries ago resembles what we are experiencing now. From the solitude of facing death along with the difficulty of breathing, to the distrust of vaccines. This paper demonstrates that through the analysis of poems we can describe tragic events that are currently happening. Therefore, the study of poetry is a credible method to describe and compare the past and the present, especially if they are tragic topics since poets tend to go deep into those matters and transform traumatic experiences into words.

*Keywords:* Past Epidemics, Poetry, COVID-19

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar y comparar las conexiones entre la experiencia de aquellos que vivieron durante épocas de pandemia u otras enfermedades con lo que estamos actualmente experimentando con la pandemia del COVID-19, a partir del análisis e interpretación de sus poemas y nuestras noticias y experiencia colectiva. El análisis de los poemas de Lucrecio, Nashe, Montagu, Little, Young y Dixon, claramente muestran que lo que nuestros antepasados experimentaron hace centenares de años se parece a lo que estamos experimentando hoy. Desde la soledad de enfrentarse a la muerte junto con la dificultad de respirar, hasta la desconfianza de las vacunas. Este trabajo demuestra que mediante el análisis de los poemas podemos describir eventos trágicos que están sucediendo actualmente. Por lo tanto, el estudio de la poesía es un método fiable para describir y comparar el pasado y el presente, especialmente cuando se trata de asuntos trágicos, ya que los poetas suelen adentrarse profundamente en estos temas y transformar la experiencia traumática en palabras.

*Palabras clave:* Epidemias del Pasado, Poesía, COVID-19

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## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, everybody is facing the impact of COVID-19 either directly or indirectly. Modern advances in transportation and commerce have made it possible for a virus to become a global problem. According to the World Health Organization, more than 3.8 million people have now died of COVID-19 worldwide. This number continues to increase while scientists and doctors are trying to fight it with handwashing, masks, social distancing, and new vaccines. Meanwhile, governments are endorsing the use of facial masks and imposing severe or partial lockdowns. It seems that this epidemic has changed the modern pursuit of happiness and wealth due to the risk of catching the virus and dying. Therefore, people are beginning to wish for health rather than wealth and happiness. To ensure staying healthy, many people stay indoors and avoid interacting with people, including friends and family. These tragic circumstances might feel like an unprecedented event that is hard to define in words, but this is not the first epidemic that we have had in our history. If we look back at history and the recorded written poems, we could find some wisdom and draw connections. The reason to prioritise the analysis of poems and no other literary forms such as prose is that poetry is more expressive than prose and tends to capture the authentic experience felt by the authors, making the reader visualise the scenario better while touching their heart deeply. Also, poetry has been the dominant genre for most of human history. Through poetry, we can get a deeper understanding of their reality and what they had to live through, which might resemble our current experience. It may feel hard to find words to describe what we are living today, but if we read the poetry of the past pandemics, we can find wisdom and comfort, which may help us to find ways to express our own tragic experience. As Mathew Arnold explained, poetry should be held in higher regard and considered a more credible resource than it had been perceived as in the past.

We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete. (Arnold, 1880, pp. xvii-xviii)

## 2. The Plague of Athens

As stated in *Epidemics and Pandemics* (2005), “in the summer of 430 B.C.E, a very violent epidemic affected the Greek city of Athens” (Hays, p.1). Thucydides, who recovered from the disease and told its story, estimated that between 25 and 35 per cent of the Athenian population died in this horrible pandemic that reached all classes and age groups. As Thucydides described in *History of the Peloponnesian War*, those who contracted the disease would completely lose hope of recovering from it, and their relatives would be afraid to come to their aid.

The most terrible thing of all was the despair into which people fell when they realized that they had caught the plague; for they would immediately adopt an attitude of utter hopelessness, and, by giving in in this way, would lose their powers of resistance. Terrible, too, was the sight of people dying like sheep through having caught the disease as a result of nursing others. This indeed caused more deaths than anything else. For when people were afraid to visit the sick, then they died with no one to look after them; indeed, there were many houses in which all the inhabitants perished through lack of any attention. When, on the other hand, they did visit the sick they lost their own lives, and this was particularly true of those who made it a point of honour to act properly. (Thucydides, 1916, p.125-126)

The passage written by Thucydides echoes what we have been experiencing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Common sense tells us to be afraid of going near unmasked people due to the risk of contracting and transmitting the virus. People had to decide if they wanted to take the risk of spending time with family. Unfortunately, in some cases, we do not have the luxury of choice. Many people have not been able to say their last goodbye to their relatives because hospitals would not allow any visits for patients infected with SARS-CoV-2.

### 2.1. *The Life of Lucretius*

Lucretius was an Epicurean poet who probably lived in Rome and died in 54 B.C. Unfortunately, there is not much known about the life of Lucretius. The only reliable sources of information from him are his six-book Latin hexameter poem called *De Rerum Natura*, often translated as *On the Nature of Things*, and a letter of Cicero, written in 54 B.C, commenting on the genius poetry of Lucretius (Sedley, 2018).



### 2.1.1 *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius

Lucretius's epic poem *On the Nature of Things* ends in Book VI with a final didactical account of the Plague of Athens based on the works of Thucydides.

Nunc ratio quae sit morbis aut unde repente  
mortiferam possit cladem conflare coorta  
morbida vis hominum generi pecudumque catervis,  
expediam. ... (Lucretius, 1893, lines 1090-1094)

---

I now propose to look into the cause  
Of disease, or basic source from which  
A fatal force can suddenly arise  
And kindle deadly ruin for mankind  
And hosts of animals. ... (Lucretius, 1974, p.215)

As Lucretius states, a disease can suddenly arise and strike both humankind and animals. The COVID-19 virus has also affected humans and animals, from pets like cats and dogs to wild animals like gorillas, lions, and minks. Dr Anna Fagre (Whitcomb, 2020), mentioned that humans with SARS-CoV-2 could infect animals, but usually, animals will not spread it back to humans. However, a case at a mink farm in Europe proved that minks who had caught SARS-CoV-2 could circulate the virus within their animal population and then spread it back to humans.

Lucretius tries to give a kind of scientific explanation of the diseases' origins instead of attributing it to a punishment by the Gods.

... Primum multarum semina rerum  
esse supra docui quae sint vitalia nobis,  
et contra quae sint morbo mortique necessest  
multa volare. ea cum casu sunt forte coorta  
et perturbarunt caelum, fit morbidus aer.  
atque ea vis omnis morborum pestilitasque  
aut extrinsecus, ut nubes nebulaeque, superne  
per caelum veniunt, aut ipsa saepe coortae  
de terra surgunt, ubi putorem umida nactast  
intempestivis pluviisque et solibus icta. (Lucretius, 1893, lines

1093-1103)

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Above, the seeds of many things that help  
Support our life, as well as many things  
That cause disease and death, must fly about.  
When these by chance happen to come together  
And throw the sky into confusion, air  
Becomes disease-laden. And this whole force  
Of sickness and plagues comes from outside,  
Down on us through the sky like mists and clouds;  
Or gathers itself up from out of earth  
When soil takes on a stench, made foul and damp  
Under untimely rains or spells of heat. (Lucretius, 1975, p. 215)

For Lucretius, life has things that help support our life and others that cause disease and death, and both are flying around in the sky. SARS-CoV-2 spreads through the air, and people commonly catch the virus when they are close to someone infected. Therefore, it is essential to stay 6 feet apart, wear a mask in public, and ventilate rooms.

Then, Lucretius describes how the plague affected the realms of “Cecropis”, Athens.

Haec ratio quondam morborum et mortifer aestus  
finibus in Cecropis funestos reddidit agros  
vastavitque vias, exhausit civibus urbem. (Lucretius, 1893, lines  
1138-1140)

---

This was the cause of the Great Plague at Athens,  
A death tide of disease that turned the land  
Into a burial ground, emptied the streets  
And drained the city of its citizens. (Lucretius, 1974, p. 216)

During the Plague of Athens, the streets were empty due to the high mortality rates. Perhaps people also felt more secure in less crowded places. The cities drained of citizens resonates with what has happened to our cities since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, because states

and local governments across the world have forced people to stay at home, as well as implemented travel restrictions which meant a decrease in the arrival of tourists to the cities. During the strictest days of lockdown, the streets have been so empty that we have seen footage of wild animals entering into quiet deserted streets, such as in the Spanish city of Barcelona, in which wild boars have been seen venturing deep into the city centre. Overall, the human confinement during the lockdown has positively affected the environment. Air and water quality have improved, and there is less noise pollution. And with no human competition, wildlife has taken a break from people and regained their territory (Arora et al., 2020).

Additionally, Lucretius details some of the accompanying symptoms of the plague.

Principio caput incensum fervore gerebant  
et duplicis oculos suffusa luce rubentes. (Lucretius, 1893, lines  
1145-1146)

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The first symptoms were heads burning with fever  
And both eyes bloodshot with a suffused light. (Lucretius, 1974,  
p.216)

Although not as severe as in the Plague of Athens, one of the first symptoms of coronavirus is fever and sometimes conjunctivitis. To relieve the heat in the body produced by the plague, people tried Coldwater immersion.

Intima pars hominum vero flagrabat ad ossa,  
flagrabat stomacho flamma ut fornacibus intus.  
nil adeo posses cuiquam leve tenveque membris  
vertere in utilitatem, at ventum et frigora semper  
in fluvios partim gelidos ardentia morbo  
membra dabant nudum iacentes corpus in undas. (Lucretius,  
1893, lines 1168-1173)

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... In the stomach  
A flame burned like that inside furnaces.  
You could make use of nothing to relieve  
And bring down this heat in the limbs, except

To keep a cool breeze stirring. Some victims  
Immersed their bodies blazing with the plague  
In cold rivers, hurling the bare body  
Right at the waves (Lucretius, 1974, p.217)

Coldwater immersion has been used for centuries as a method for improving the immune system. Nowadays, there has been an increase in the number of people who believe that cold water immersion could provide reasonable protection against COVID-19. According to Reuters (Reuters Staff, 2020), the popularity of winter swimming in Estonia has increased since the country went into lockdown. However, as Lucretius mentions, there was no medicine to cure the disease and no effective ways to relieve the pain.

Nec requies erat ulla mali: defessa iacebant  
corpora. mussabat tacito medicina timore. (Lucretius, 1893,  
lines 1178-1179)

---

... No form of respite from pain  
Existed. The tired bodies lay in bed.  
And Medicine mumbled, silent with fear. (Lucretius, 1974,  
p.217)

There was a similar sense of fear in the world at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic because there were no treatments, and the medical community could not even agree on the symptoms. However, the advances in modern medicine have made it possible for us to create a vaccine within a year, and this has given the world hope and relieved some of the fear felt originally.

The devastation from the Plague of Athens was so astronomical that instead of using churches for prayer, they were used to store the deceased.

Omnia denique sancta deum delubra repleat  
corporibus mors exanimis onerataque passim  
cuncta cadaveribus caelestum templa manebant,  
hospitibus loca quae complebant aedituentes. (Lucretius, 1893,  
lines 1272-1275)

---

Death had filled all the holy shrines

Of the gods with lifeless bodies; and all  
The temples of heaven's inhabitants  
Stayed as they were, loaded up at random  
With dead bodies. ... (Lucretius, 1974, p.220)

During the deadliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, modern hospitals and morgues have also suffered an overflow of lifeless bodies due to increased mortality rates. Disturbing photos of piles of dead bodies were leaked to CNN (Young et al., 2020), who reported that the morgue at Sinai-Grace Hospital was not handling the deceased respectfully. The photos showed body bags stacked on the floor of a portable refrigerator outside the hospital.

The poem by Lucretius ends with an account of how traditional burial methods had to be altered due to how dangerous the plague was.

Nec mos ille sepulturae remanebat in urbe,  
quo prius hic populus semper consuerat humari;  
perturbatus enim totus trepidabat, et unus  
quisque suum pro re et praesenti maestus humabat.  
(Lucretius, 1893, lines 1278-1281)

---

No set manner  
Of burial was observed in a city  
Whose people formerly had kept  
To rites of inhumation. Each man feared  
And in bewilderment, in his sorrow,  
Each buried his kinsman in any way  
The circumstance allowed. (Lucretius, 1974, p.220)

The coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown measures have also altered the way funerals are being held today. In the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, funerals were being held with little or no families at all, even if the deceased had not died of COVID-19. Many of those who died were buried in the absence of their family or just with few members. Moreover, Jasper Pickering (2020) reported that Ecuador had a shortage of coffins, and people had to use cardboard boxes for their deceased.

### 3. The London Plague

As mentioned in *Epidemics and Pandemics* (Hays, 2005), London and the British Isles suffered a nearly continuous presence of bubonic plague between 1349 and 1670. However, the three most significant plague outbreaks in London in 1563, 1603 and 1665 are worthy of being called the Great Plague. In 1563 about 20 per cent of the London population died of the plague, 18 per cent in 1603 and 12 per cent in 1665. According to John Stow (1880), the Queen in Council issued on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July of 1563 that every householder in London should make bonfires in the streets and lanes at seven in the evening. They had to make the bonfires three times per week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The intention was for the fires to consume the corrupt airs of the plague. Charles Creighton (1891), who analysed Stow's manuscript memoranda, states that in London in 1563, 20,372 people died of disease and specifically of plague 17,404. The plague so heavily impacted London that over 80% of all the deaths were from the bubonic plague.

#### 3.1. *The Life of Thomas Nashe*

Thomas Nashe was an Elizabethan playwright, poet, satirist, and pamphleteer. His work is of value for his brilliant prose and his vivid portrayal of Elizabethan life. He was born at Lowestoft in 1567. Nashe was the son of a clergyman who six years later became the rector of West Harling in Norfolk. His father probably educated him before Nashe matriculated at Cambridge in 1582. In 1589 he made his first appearance in print. He wrote in 1597 the play *The Isle of Dogs*, which the state perceived as containing seditious and defamatory matter. As a result, several of the men involved with the play were imprisoned, and Nashe left London in a hurry escaping punishment. Ecclesiastical authorities ordered the burning of certain books they disliked, and their permission was needed for publishing satires and epigrams. They also ordered Nashe's books to be confiscated, and publishers were ordered to never print their books. However, some of Nashe's literary works have survived, and even Nashe himself managed to publish in 1600 *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, which was composed some years earlier. Nevertheless, it might have been damaging to him because he died the following year, and the circumstances are unknown (Nashe, 1964).

##### 3.1.1. "Adieu, Farewell, Earth's Bliss" by Thomas Nashe

Inside Nashe's play *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (Nashe, 1964, pp 91-142), there is a poem named "Adieu, Farewell, Earth's Bliss" (Nashe, 1964, pp. 129-131), which is of great

importance for this work since it speaks about the plague and the immediacy and inevitability of the narrator's death. The poem is for Summer, one of the characters of Nashe's comedy, who is approaching his end and demands a song to ease his suffering. The poem's speaker is the narrator, and each stanza contains three rhymed couplets and a concluding unrhymed line that repeats in every stanza: "Lord have mercy on us". Today, this prayer could be said by believers and by people living within an immediate and frightening context such as a deadly disease. As Stephen Porter (2005) explained, during London's plague years, to prevent the spreading of the disease, the people infected with the plague were locked in their houses along with their entire families for periods of twenty to forty days. To prevent others from coming near those houses a red cross was marked on their door along with a paper containing the words "Lord have mercy upon us". Furthermore, the last rhymed line, "I am sick, I must die", keeps repeating in every stanza, which shows a complete awareness and acceptance of the immediacy of the narrator's death. This line could be the thoughts of anyone suffering from a deadly disease once they realise that there is no treatment to save them.

The poem starts right from the beginning with the narrator's awareness of the immediacy of his or her death. The narrator realises that the desires of the mind and flesh cease to be important when someone is facing death.

Adieu, farewell, earth's bliss;  
This world uncertain is;  
Fond are life's lustful joys;  
Death proves them all but toys;  
None from his darts can fly;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us! (Nashe, 1964, lines 1-7)

Death appears to be personified and able to throw mortal darts at people who cannot evade them. In a way, this description of "Death" seems a comparison to Cupid, but instead of throwing arrows, Death throws darts. Then, the narrator mentions that not even gold can guarantee health because all things are meant to end, and the physical self will one day fade.

Rich men, trust not in wealth,  
Gold cannot buy you health;  
Physic himself must fade.  
All things to end are made,

The plague full swift goes by;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us! (Nashe, 1964, lines 8-14)

During times of epidemics or illness, people would undoubtedly value health over wealth. But wealth is still a factor that can contribute to health. For example, there is a limited amount of COVID-19 vaccines, and usually, people must wait in the governmental queue for the vaccines. Still, as reported by Kate Wills (2021), wealthy people travel abroad to places where they can get a private vaccination, such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, what is now known as vaccination vacations. However, it does not matter how rich we are because no one escapes death, and sooner or later, all things come to an end. Following that, the narrator mentions that even beauty can die.

Beauty is but a flower  
Which wrinkles will devour;  
Brightness falls from the air;  
Queens have died young and fair;  
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us! (Nashe, 1964, lines 15-21)

“Beauty is but a flower” is a metaphor that represents that even beauty is temporary and sooner or later will fall. When Nashe says, “Queens have died young and fair”, he might be referring to Elizabeth Woodville, the grandmother of Henry VIII. As reported by Alison Flood (2019), a 500-year old letter was recently found which revealed that the White Queen might have died of the plague in 1492. This would explain why her funeral was so modest. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a royal family member died of COVID-19, although she did not die young. María Teresa de Borbón-Parma, a cousin of Spain's King Felipe VI died at the age of 86 due to coronavirus (Hurtado, 2020). The poem also makes an allusion to Helen of Troy. According to Greek mythology she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and it did not help her evade death. Not only beauty can die, but strength as well.

Strength stoops unto the grave,  
Worms feed on Hector brave;  
Swords may not fight with fate,  
Earth still holds open her gate.



“Come, come!” the bells do cry.

I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!(Nashe, 1964, lines 22-28)

This Hector that the narrator is speaking about is none other than Hector of Troy, considered one of Troy’s bravest and strongest warriors in the Trojan War. However, he perished in the war. His fate was to die by the sword of Achilles. It seems that the narrator wanted to make another metaphorical allusion, this time to show that even the strongest men also die.

Even comedy can be silenced by death.

Wit with his wantonness

Tasteth death’s bitterness;

Hell’s executioner

Hath no ears for to hear

What vain art can reply.

I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us! (Nashe, 1964, lines 29-35)

There appears to be an alliteration in the first line of the 5<sup>th</sup> stanza, “Wit with his wantonness” (line 29), since the /w/ sound repeats at the beginning of the words “wit”, “with”, and “wantonness”. This stanza could be read as a reference to the persecution that Nashe suffered by the State and Church for his comedies. Some people who do not understand art would condemn comedies and satires in times of death, to the point of even banning them. In a way, comedy could also die. It might seem wrong to make jokes when the world is going through a pandemic, but humour and laughter are coping mechanisms that release stress. According to psychologist Marilyn Mendoza (2020), we should not let comedy become another victim of COVID-19 because laughter is comforting and relaxing. It strengthens our immunity system and reduces our fears.

The final stanza concludes by giving hope to those about to depart. Life on Earth could just be a “stage”, and there might be life beyond death.

Haste, therefore, each degree,

To welcome destiny;

Heaven is our heritage,

Earth but a player’s stage;

Mount we unto the sky.

I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us! (Nashe, 1964, lines 36-42)

Overall, the poem shows that no one can escape death no matter how rich, beautiful, strong, or clever they are. Eventually, they will die. However, there is optimism that there might be more beyond what we know, and for that, we need to pray to God to show us mercy and hope he lets us enter into heaven's gate.

## 4. Smallpox

According to the World Health Organization (2014), the epidemic of smallpox has been one of the most devastating diseases known to humanity. The finding of smallpox rashes on Egyptian mummies suggests that smallpox has existed for over 3000 years. Therefore, this ancient disease might have originated in Egypt. Smallpox is usually transmitted from person to person by air droplets spread in face-to-face contact with an infected person. After an incubation period of 12 to 14 days, those infected with the virus develop influenza-like symptoms, such as fever, weakness, headache, vomiting, and back and abdominal pain. Two to three days later, a characteristic rash appears in the skin, first on the face, hands and forearms, and after it progresses to the torso. There are recognised two forms of the disease, the variola minor with a mortality rate of 1% and the more common variola with a mortality rate of 30%. The smallpox survivors would have deep pitted scars on their bodies and most prominently on their faces for the rest of their lives. However, thanks to the use of vaccines, the smallpox disease was formally declared eradicated in 1980. In 1797 Edward Jenner demonstrated that the injection of the live vaccinia virus could protect people against smallpox. Contrary to popular belief, Edward Jenner was not the first to find a method to protect us against smallpox. Although on a minor scale, techniques to develop immunology against smallpox were used centuries before Jenner's discovery.

Jenner's achievement was to show the medical establishment and society that this method was reliable and effective. Although it seems certain that Jenner never travelled more than 150 miles from the village in which he was born, and was never to leave his beloved England, his work illuminated the world, and very rapidly too. (Bazin, p. xx)

### 4.1. *The Life of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, born in 1689, was an English aristocrat, letter writer, essayist, feminist, and poet. Her husband was the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, this provided her the opportunity to travel with him on his duties. As George Paston (1907) stated, her brother Lord Kingston died of smallpox in 1713, soon after the birth of her first child. Two years later, Montagu contracted the disease and recovered from it, but it left her at the age of 26 with the typical scar marks of the survivors. Montagu is very well known for pioneering the practice of inoculation in England after she found out on her visit to Constantinople, in today's

Istanbul, that an immunisation method effective against smallpox was being used in those parts. In a letter from Lady Mary to Mrs Sarah Chiswell written in 1717, Montagu described her experience after learning of this immunisation method that was unknown yet by the public in Britain.

I am going to tell you a thing that will make you wish yourself here. The small-pox, so fatal and so general amongst us, is here entirely harmless. ... There is a set of old women who make it their business to perform the operation every autumn. People send to one another to know if any of their family has a mind to have the small-pox; they make parties for this purpose, and when they are met (commonly fifteen or sixteen together), the old woman comes with a nut-shell full of the matter of the best sort of small-pox, ... and puts into the vein as much matter as can lie upon the head of her needle, and after that binds up the little wound with a hollow bit of shell; and in this manner opens four or five veins. The children or young patients play together all the rest of the day, and are in perfect health to the eighth. Then the fever begins to seize them, and they keep their beds two days, very seldom three. They have very rarely above twenty or thirty [spots] in their faces, which never mark; and in eight days' time they are as well as before their illness. ... Every year thousands undergo this operation. ... There is no example of any one that has died in it; and you may believe I am well satisfied of the safety of this experiment, since I intend to try it on my dear little son. (Montagu, 1906, p.124)

#### 4.1.1. "Saturday: The Small-pox, Flavia" by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

According to George Paston (1907), between 1715 and 1717, Lady Mary wrote six town eclogues, which are the best known of Lady Mary's poetical works. Its merit lies in the intimate description of the social types and manners of the period. The last of the six *Town Eclogues* is called "Saturday. The Small-pox. Flavia". The poem describes satirically the feelings of a character named Flavia after seeing in the mirror the marks that smallpox left in her face after she recovered from the disease. Montagu might have expressed through the voice of Flavia her own feelings after she had recovered from the illness.

The poem "Saturday. The Small-pox. Flavia" (Montagu, 1861, pp.446-448) is written in iambic pentameter couplets. The first stanza begins with the external narrator describing

Flavia reclined on her couch with a troubled mind as she rejects the reflection of her image through the looking glass.

The wretched Flavia on her couch reclin'd,  
Thus breath'd the anguish of a wounded mind;  
A glass revers'd in her right hand she bore,  
For now she shunn'd the face she sought before. (Montagu,  
1861, lines 1-4)

The following lines are written through the voice of Flavia. As we know, those who recovered from smallpox would be left with scar marks on their face. For Flavia, these marks have changed her appearance so much that she is now unknown to herself after having recovered from smallpox, as the title of the poem suggests.

“How am I chang'd ! alas ! how am I grown  
A frightful spectre, to myself unknown!  
Where's my Complexion ? where the radiant Bloom,  
That promis'd happiness for Years to come?  
Then with what pleasure I this face survey'd ! (Montagu, 1861,  
lines 5-9)

Flavia seems to take the mirror glass and pray for it to restore her beauty; however, that is impossible. As a young unmarried woman, Flavia's beauty and youthfulness would get her to win favours from her suitors. But now that her beauty has faded, being young will not matter in her opinion.

Ah ! faithless glass, my wonted bloom restore;  
Alas ! I rave, that bloom is now no more!  
The greatest good the GODS on men bestow,  
Ev'n youth itself, to me is useless now.  
There was a time, (oh! that I could forget!)  
When opera-tickets pour'd before my feet;  
And at the ring, where brightest beauties shine,  
The earliest cherries of the spring were mine. (Montagu, 1861,  
lines 13-20)

Flavia begins to tell what she was able to achieve when she was beautiful. She seems

to exaggerate by saying that her beauty could stop the politicians from debating to pass a look at her.

For me the Patriot has the house forsook,  
And left debates to catch a passing look:  
'For me the Soldier has soft verses writ;  
'For me the Beau has aim'd to be a Wit. (Montagu, 1861, lines  
28-31)

Now that she sees herself as ugly, she remembers how much time she spent before dressing and attending to her appearance, but now she finds her ugliness beyond repair. With her beauty gone, she will not need to spend any more time taking care of her appearance.

And thou, my toilette! where I oft have sat,  
While hours unheeded pass'd in deep debate,  
How curls should fall, or where a patch to place:  
If blue or scarlet best became my face;  
Now on some happier nymph thy aid bestow;  
On fairer heads, ye useless jewels glow!  
No borrow'd lustre can my charms restore;  
Beauty is fled, and dress is now no more! (Montagu, 1861, lines  
47-54)

“Beauty is fled, and dress is now no more!” is a line repeated five times throughout the poem but with minor changes. The word “dress” will be substituted for “presents” (line 27), “lovers” (line 40), “empire” (line 64) and “spirit” (line 74), emphasising what Flavia thinks that she has lost with the loss of her beauty. “Beauty is fled” is a personification of the noun beauty, giving it the properties of running away.

For Flavia, her beauty was her way of having success. But now that she has lost it, all she can do is cry since she has lost her empire of suitors.

But oh! how vain, how wretched is the boast  
Of beauty faded, and of empire lost!  
What now is left but weeping, to deplore  
My beauty fled, and empire now no more! (Montagu, 1861,  
lines 61-64)

She blames the Chemists for not having developed yet something that would help restore her skin and sees her beauty beyond repair, as no cream seems to work.

Ye, cruel Chymists, what with-held your aid!  
Could no pomatums save a trembling maid?  
How false and trifling is that art you boast;  
No art can give me back my beauty lost. (Montagu, 1861, lines  
65-68)

With her beauty lost, Flavia feels that she has lost all purpose a woman like her could have in her time. She will no longer be invited to the opera, and there is no need to take care of her appearance. The poem concludes with Flavia deciding to live an isolated life.

There let me live in some deserted place,  
There hide in shades this lost inglorious face.  
Ye, operas, circles, I no more must view!  
My toilette, patches, all the world adieu!" (Montagu, 1861, lines  
93-96)

In conclusion, the poem criticises a society in which women are valued only for their beauty. Flavia should be grateful for having survived the smallpox disease since many people have been either blinded by it or died from it, such as Lady Mary's brother. However, all she thinks of is her beauty lost, and with it the loss of the prestige for a woman whose only merit is her beauty. As she places her self-worth in her physical appearance, she feels that she cannot be part of society. Traditionally, the last eclogue laments a death. But, in this poem, the lamentation is not due to the death of someone but due to the death of the beauty of the narrator. Contrary to smallpox, those who have recovered from coronavirus do not have a physical mark left in their body. However, as Dr Stevens (2020) mentioned, some people who have recovered from COVID-19 would suffer possibly life-changing cognitive damage due to strokes. In a way, Flavia's distress for having lost her beauty without being grateful for having recovered from the disease reminds me of the youth that takes the coronavirus for granted, as they complain that the discotheques are closed.

#### 4.2. *The Life of Lora Little*

Not all of the general public thought that Jenner's vaccine was a victory to public health, some thought that the vaccine was dangerous and could possibly threaten lives. As the vaccination against smallpox received social attention and spread its use, a counter movement grew, the anti-vaccination movement. One of the most prominent figures of the anti-vaccination movement was Lora Cornelia Little. Lora Little was born in Minnesota in 1856 and died in Chicago in 1931. Lora blamed Jenner's smallpox vaccine for the death of her only son, who died at the age of seven, months after having gone through a mandatory vaccine. After her son's death, Lora Little spent the rest of her life crusading against mandatory vaccination laws. In 1898, two years after her son's death, she founded *The Liberator*, a monthly magazine where she could express her ideas condemning modern medicine. She believed that healthy diets and healthy lifestyles could prevent all illness from infections to cancer and that doctors performing vaccinations were making wealth without thinking that the children were put in danger (Youngdahl, 2017).

Vaccination is a failure. No doubt on this point can exist in the minds of any who have given it a thorough study. Its fraudulent character is indicated by the following points:

1. The secrecy and compulsion resorted to keep it in vogue.
2. The refusal of its supporters to consider it an open question, though great numbers of people, including many scientific men, oppose and denounce it.
3. Insistence by the medical profession that even compulsory vaccination is purely a medical question, when as a matter of fact it is first a statistical and second a political question. Statistics is a science to be left to statisticians rather than doctors, while politics in a democracy belongs to the whole people
4. The verdict of all the great statisticians of the world who have made a special study of the question has been against vaccination.
5. In fact it is, after all, a question of plain common sense. Taking poisonous matter from a sore on a sick calf and putting it into the system by way of an open wound does not appeal to common sense. Common sense seeing the results finds itself justified. (Little, 1918, pp. 35-36)



#### 4.2.1. “The Calf Path” by Lora Little

In 1903 Lora Little published on the front page of *The Liberator* a short poem titled “The Calf Path”. The poem, written in rhyming couplets and made of two stanzas, with the second one being an iambic tetrameter, is from the very beginning a severe critique of the origin of Jenner’s smallpox vaccine and to the government and doctors for agreeing to its use. The narrator could be Lora Little herself, showing her antivaccine view.

No calf ever took a crookeder way  
Than Jenner’s cow made in that day  
When milkmaids<sup>1</sup> taught the doctors “science”  
And State and Medicine formed alliance. (Little, 1903, lines 1-4)

The poem follows Lora’s belief that doctors ignore the facts that sustain that vaccines are dangerous for the body while they insist that vaccines are safe. Lora concludes the poem with a satirical juxtaposition, placing two inconceivably things next to each other “pus is pure” and “good health a crime”. The final verse is a hyperbole exaggerating the virtues of vaccines.

And still do doctors turn and twist,  
And dodge and double and insist  
That pus is “pure”, good health a crime,  
And vaccine saves you every time. (Little, 1903, lines 5-8)

Even though smallpox was eradicated due to vaccines, there are still today many people who do not trust vaccines or those who try to promote the use. A survey conducted on the 3rd of December by the Pew Research Center (Funk & Tyson, 2020) showed that about 1 out of 5 U.S. adults have no intention to get vaccinated even if more favourable information becomes available. Still, governments are trying to increase the vaccination rates by offering to the public vaccine lottery incentives in hopes to persuade those who are still hesitant about getting the vaccine. For instance, on May 27 of 2021 the governor of California announced that the state would spend a total of 116,5 million dollars in vaccine lottery prizes. However, this might backfire as some people might think that the vaccine is dangerous, so the government is offering money for people to take it (McGregor, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> According to the story Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine inspired by the story of a milkmaid who claimed that she should never have smallpox since she had had cowpox already.

## 5. The 1813–1814 Malta Plague Epidemic

There have been many outbreaks of bubonic plague throughout our history. Even today, bubonic plague is still present in countries like Madagascar. The Isles of Malta suffered the bubonic plague between March of 1813 and September of 1814. About 4,500 people out of a population of around 100,000 perished from that plague. That is, nearly 5% of its population died (Mangion, 2013). According to Robert Calvert (1815), the outbreak began from an infected ship from Egypt, where the plague was present and rapidly spread to the Maltese population.

On the 29th of March, a vessel called the San Niccolo, arrived at Malta from Alexandria, in Egypt; the master of which informed the officers of health, as he came into port, that he believed the ship was infected with plague, having lost two men during the voyage of what he strongly suspected to have been that disorder, particularly as it was raging at Alexandria, when he left that place. One of the men, he said, had a black tumour upon his neck, to which he himself had applied poultices. ... The master and surviving part of the crew, being apparently healthy, were permitted to disembark in the lazaret; not, however, before they had taken the usual precautions of shaving their heads, washing themselves with sea-water, and afterwards with vinegar, and of leaving their clothes behind them in the ship. ... The whole continued, in appearance, to enjoy the most perfect health till the first of April, when on the afternoon of that day, the captain, while playing at ball, was suddenly seized with headache, giddiness, and other symptoms of plague; and he died in the course of about thirty-six hours. His servant, who had also assisted the sick men, on board, was seized about the same time with similar symptoms, and he died after a like interval. ... On the 19th of April, a Maltese physician, Dr. Gravagna, being called to visit a child of the name of Borg in Strada S. Paolo, found it in a dying state, of what he then believed to be a typhus fever. On the 1st of May, the same physician was again called to see the mother of this child. (Calvert, p.3-7)

### 5.1. *The Life of Murdo Young*

Murdo Young was born in Scotland in 1791. He was a man of business, a newspaper proprietor, a ready writer, and a poet of considerable reputation. He is known for having been from around

1832 to 1850 the editor and proprietor of a London evening newspaper called *The Sun*, later merged with the *True Sun*, not to be confused with today's *Sun* founded much more recently in 1964 (Watson, 1969). According to Alexander Andrews (1859), Young's newspaper was praised for its fast delivery of coverage of the election results for the Speakership of the House of Commons. However, in 1850 Young became bankrupt, and Mr Charles Kent, his son-in-law, bought the paper. Among Murdo Young's reporters, there was Charles Dickens himself, who reported on events in parliament (Mackenzie, 1870).

### 5.1.1. *Antonia* by Murdo Young

In 1818 Murdo Young published *Antonia*, a ninety-two page long romantic poem descriptive of the Plague in Malta with rhyming couplets of iambic pentameters. The poem is divided into three cantos, and it includes the author's notes at the end. To write the poem Young was inspired by his visit to Malta in 1813, where he witnessed the Malta plague epidemic during his stay from the beginning to its end. Most of the time, the speaker of the poem is the narrator; however, the characters will also have a voice in the poem.

The poem set in Melita, today's Malta, is a kind of Shakespearian romantic drama between Antonia and Orlando. Because of Orlando's poverty, Antonia's parents do not allow their union. Therefore, Orlando decides to sail away to seek his fortune to get back to her. News will come to Antonia that Orlando has perished in a shipwreck. Her parents will arrange the matrimony of her to another man named Dylrook despite her still loving Orlando. However, Dylrook does not appear at the wedding, and news arrives that the plague has set in Malta's capital and that Dylrook has fallen ill with the plague.

With tidings drear — “The Pest and Quarantine  
Detain Dylrook in perilous distress!  
Valetta mourns — beware whom ye embrace!” —  
A secret horror chilled parental pride —  
Dispersed the guests — and saved the destined Bride;  
Suspended pleasure in the dread of pain,  
While desolation urged his woful reign. (Young, 2.21.34-40)

With the news that the plague has spread to the city, the wedding guests disperse with terror, and everyone is aware that it is dangerous even to hold relatives in one's arms. We have also suffered the danger of hugging people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today many people

no longer hug their relatives, or if they do, they do it regardless of their knowledge that it might be risky.

With the arrival of the plague, the streets were depopulated, and “nights red” could be seen from the burnings of the infected houses’ belongings because of the belief that the bacteria could stay on objects. The plague affected not only the body of the people but also their minds because everyone was devastated and untrusting of others, “breaking the chain uniting man to man” because infected people could spread the disease. Therefore a natural human thing such as to help someone in times of need becomes dreadful because, as the narrator expresses, “it is like the shipwrecked mariner trying to rescue his drowning companion, and sinking with him into the same oblivious grave”(Young, p.96). As Young noted, it was so dreadful that at night vehicles would come to take men, women, and babies left dead on the field, and they would leave while the morning approached to not cause public alarm. In today’s times, commerce has been affected by the epidemic outbreaks of COVID-19, having to close businesses to prevent multitudes from getting close to infected people. During the Malta plague, people would not only die of the plague but also from starvation.

What scenes arise on anguished memory!  
From streets depopulated — towns forlorn  
Nights red with ruin lighting in the morn!<sup>2</sup>  
From Feeling’s wreck — from Nature’s mortal throes  
Where shall I turn — nor meet appalling woes!  
Envenomed plague! — that terror of mankind,  
Destroyed the social sympathies of mind,  
Subdued the proud — the humble heart distrest,  
Bade joy be sad — and beauty be unblest!  
Spread through the Isle its overwhelming gloom,  
And daily dug the nightly glutted tomb!  
Men — women — babes — promiscuous, crowd the scene,  
Till morning chase their bearers from the green!  
Reflection sickens at the tragic tale,  
Where lamentation’s murmurs fed the gale  
Where every face betrayed the secret dread

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<sup>2</sup> This line evokes a very powerful visual imagery of how the city looked from the fires that were produced.

Who next will swell the number of the dead!  
Self-preservation mutually began  
To break the chain uniting man to man.  
Commerce departed — strangers shunned the bay —  
And gaunt Starvation perished where he lay! (Young, 2.22.2-  
22)

As Murdo Young noted, in the early stages of the epidemic, the victims of this disease could present the symptoms and die in about a week. However, the disease became more virulent later, and people could show the signs in the evening and die in the morning. For some people, pestilence would be a curse from heaven, personified as death himself.

Devouring Pestilence! accurst of heaven —  
Fell taming scourge of nations unforgiven!  
Still dreaded fiend! of rankling matter born,  
Whose evening victims saw their latest morn,  
Creation withers at thy coming breath —  
Thy name is horror: and thy presence death! —  
The glare of madness lightened in his eye —  
Woe marked his cheek — his voice was agony!  
Fever his frame — unquenchable his thirst —  
His mind was anguish — and himself accurst! —  
Terrific visitant! that cowed the soul —  
As lightning, fierce and graspless to control; —  
His march was loneliness without a shade!  
Day cursed his silence! — night his dark parade!  
Reflection, shuddering, as the Demon past,  
Shrunk from the future moment, to his last!  
Air loathed his breath — and Earth abhorred his tread —  
He found men living — and he left them dead! — (Young,  
2.23.1-18)

Dylrook will die from the plague, and Antonia's parents will be victims of the epidemic too. Having contracted the disease, their house and belongings were burned. Young describes the people assigned to burn the infected houses as "Destruction's ruthless crew".

They come — O shame! — Destruction's ruthless crew —  
They come, like vultures to the gory plain,  
While desolation follows in their train.  
The fire of ruin meets the Orphan's gaze,  
While plundered grandeur feeds the rising blaze. (Young,  
2.24.8-12)

With Antonia's parents succumbing to the pestilence, her house has been severely damaged, and Antonia is now left orphaned and houseless. Because she has been close to someone who has contracted the disease, her friends abandon her, and she has nowhere to go.

Unhappy Orphan! where wilt thou repose  
Thy houseless head from pestilential woes?  
Thy father's mansion, ravaged, dreary, lone —  
Seems cold as death — when heaven's bright spark is  
gone.<sup>3</sup>  
Thy friends forsake thee in thy last distress,  
Poor suffering child of angel loveliness! —  
She seeks each dome where welcome smiled before —  
But fear disowns her — terror bars the door! (Young, 2.25.1-9)

Such pain would bring Antonia to almost commit suicide successfully by drowning in the deep sea if it was not for an old suitor, Moran, who rescues her. Moran spent many years sailing and away from his home and upon hearing of the plague he came close to the shore of Malta. When Antonia awakes, Moran asks her if his family and friends are well. And Antonia brings him the bad news.

“Thy youthful friend, and kinsman, is no more,  
Stretched, by contagion, lifeless on the shore.  
So fell thy sire, in giddy stupor whirled!” —  
“And lives my mother?” — “In a better world!” (Young, 3.6.3-6)

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<sup>3</sup> Young has placed the word “gone” not following the patterns of the verses and appears in isolation, emphasizing the solitude of our heroine and the destruction of the plague.

Antonia informs Moran about the devastating consequences that the plague has brought to his and her family. She will tell Moran that for a moment the plague had ceased, but it came back. As Young describes in the explanatory notes, there were three waves of the plague. The third reappearance was from men who must have known themselves to be infected but nonetheless sold bread in the streets, and the poor starving inhabitants bought it and caught the infection.

“Thou said’st the storm of pestilence had past?”—  
“Alas! the calm was deadlier than the blast.  
From street to street contagion’s venom spread  
Where guilt diffused, and hunger touch’d the bread.  
Even now remembrance shudders to retrace  
One moving scene that time may not efface:  
Before mine eyes starvation’s throng appear,  
Imploring bread — by famine made how dear!  
Around that man whose breath is pestilence  
They crowd — buy — touch — and bear contagion thence.  
Behold affection haste with panting breath,  
To bless her children with the feast of — death!  
Each fondly presses to her bounteous treat,  
And each receives what hunger longs to eat. (Young, 3.7.1-14)

This is a warning and a reminder to businesses of the importance of acting quickly and removing any employees suspected of carrying airborne diseases as there are big consequences for society. Therefore, businesses should maintain high-quality sanitary standards.

Moran blamed the Greeks for not saving the lives of his loved ones. In this moment of emotional anguish and rage, he ordered an attack on a Greek vessel, resulting in the Greeks winning the battle and Moran losing his life. As Young explains in the author’s notes, as the sickness progressed, many native doctors of the Isle died performing their duty while others would not run the risk of working on an infected patient. Greeks who had more experience and knowledge came to the aid. However, the nature of the disease completely baffled the Greeks and defied their skill, and unpopular measures were taken. Also, their numbers were so small that prisoners of war were required for assistance. Surprisingly, Orlando and Antonia’s brother were inside the Greek vessel, and they rescued Antonia from Moran’s sinking ship.

## 6. The AIDS Epidemic

AIDS is a deadly disease that stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. A disease caused by the HIV virus. Positives of HIV might go through three stages of the infection: Acute HIV infection, Chronic HIV infection and AIDS (Nall, 2020).<sup>4</sup> As stated in *Epidemics and Pandemics* (Hays, 2005), AIDS first came to public attention in 1981 in the United States, where it seemed to be mainly concentrated. “By the end of the decade, its worldwide spread began to be realized. Since then, AIDS, and the HIV infection that leads to it, have become a true pandemic. Its effects have especially ravaged sub-Saharan Africa” (p.439). In 1982 there were about 1,500 cases of AIDS diagnosed in the world. Ten years later, in 1992, those numbers reached 6.5 million. According to the World Health Organization (2020) in 2019, there were approximately 38 million people across the world with HIV and over 33 million lives have perished since its spread. As of today, there has not been a cure yet for HIV infection. However, antiretroviral drugs can reduce the amount of virus in the body and increase the life expectancy of those with the illness.

At the beginning of the disease, many Americans believed that AIDS was a gay white man’s disease. It all changed in 1991 when Magic Johnson, the African American basketball star from Los Angeles Lakers, announced his early retirement because he was HIV-positive. He became one of the first sports stars to go public about his HIV-positive status, and today he is an influential spokesman for AIDS awareness (History.com Editors, 2020).

I [Magic Johnson] am not cured. I have just been taking my meds. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing, and thank God the HIV virus in my blood system and in my body have laid dead in a sense, and we don’t want anything to wake it up and to make it be active or more active in my body. And so no, there is no cure... It used to be an instant death sentence. When you had announced HIV, it would turn into AIDS. But now with the medicine and with all the advanced science that we have today about HIV and AIDS, and people like Dr. Ho and other great people who work in the HIV/AIDS community, if you go and get tested and early detection, you can live for a long time. (Moughty, 2011)

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<sup>4</sup> Some sources consider the incubation period as the first stage of HIV infection.



### 6.1. *The Life of Melvin Dixon*

Melvin Dixon was an openly gay Afro-American novelist born on May 29 of 1950, in Stamford, Connecticut. From 1976 to 1980, he worked at Wesleyan University as an assistant professor of English. In 1986 he was promoted to full professor at Queens College. He distinguished himself in several literary genres. Besides his novels, he was also a skilled poet, literary critic, essayist, and translator. In his writings, Dixon addressed various topics such as the African diaspora, interracial intimacy, homosexual relationships, the violence of homophobia and AIDS. Dixon died on October 26 of 1992, at the age of forty-two, due to complications from AIDS (Joyce & McBride, 2006).

In March of 1992, months before his death, Melvin Dixon delivered a speech in Boston for *OutWrite '92: The third national lesbian and gay writer's conference*. A year later, Melvin Dixon's speech was published in a collection of literary works about AIDS. In his lecture titled *I'll be somewhere listening for my name*, we can see his critique of a society that treats homosexuals as second-class people and is afraid of AIDS, to the point of rejecting friends who have contracted the disease. To combat those injustices, Melvin Dixon insists on creating literary and artistic works that would witness their everyday experience.

As gay men and lesbians, we are the sexual niggers of our society. Some of you may have never before been treated like a second class, disposable citizen. Some of you have felt a certain privilege and protection in being white. ... Since I have never encountered a person of no color, I assume we are all persons of color. ... We are facing the loss of our entire generation. Lesbians lost to various cancers, gay men lost to AIDS. ... Last summer my lover Richard died. We had been lovers for twelve years. His illness and death were so much a part of my illness and life that I felt that I too, had died. ... I've lost Richard, I've lost vision in one eye, I've lost the contact of people I thought were friends, I've lost the future tense from my vocabulary. ... As white gays deny multiculturalism among gays, so too do black communities deny multisexualism among its members. Against this double cremation, we must leave the legacy of our writing and our perspectives on gay and straight experiences. Our voice is our weapon. (Dixon, 1993, pp. 199-203)

### 6.1.1. “Heartbeats” by Melvin Dixon

Melvin Dixon’s poem “Heartbeats” seems to be autobiographical since he wrote the poem during his illness with HIV. The poem first appeared in 1989 in a collection of poems that were a response to AIDS. The poem is an unrhymed iambic couplet, although it plays with the repetition of sounds. Each stanza is made of 2 verses, and each verse is made of two iambs. Every iamb ends with a full stop, making the rhythm of the poem very powerful musically since it resembles a person’s heartbeat rate as he or she is monitored at a hospital.

The poem begins with the narrator doing exercise, probably at a gym since there is a steam room, and he seems to call home afterwards.

Work out. Ten laps.

Chin ups. Look good.

Steam room. Dress warm.

Call home. Fresh air. (Dixon, 1989, lines 1-4)

In the first stanza appears a half rhyme with “laps” and “ups”. In the second stanza, there is consonance with the repetition of the final /m/ sound in words “steam”, “room”, “warm” and “home”. In my opinion, the narrator was conscious that he had HIV from the very beginning, although it had not developed yet to stage 3, where the immune system is badly damaged. Therefore, he could do exercise. In fact, according to medical doctor and HIV researcher William Stringer (1999), it is highly recommended for HIV positives to exercise as it improves the mood, quality of life and possibly the body immunity.

The narrator shows further concerns about staying healthy by eating right, resting well and having safe sexual relations, which implies the use of condoms. “Eat right. Rest well. /Sweetheart. Safe sex.” (Dixon, 1989, lines 5-6). The narrator might already be conscious of having the disease since it implicitly states, “safe sex”. From here forward, the narrator’s illness starts to be perceived as the narrator begins to have the initial flu-like symptoms of HIV. Therefore, as a precaution, it is crucial to count the number of cells to know if they are falling quickly or not.

Sore throat. Long flu.

Hard nodes. Beware.

Test blood. Count cells.

Reds thin. Whites low.

Dress warm. Eat well.

Short breath. Fatigue.

Night sweats. Dry cough.

Loose stools. Weight loss. (Dixon, 1989, lines 7-14)

Not everybody with HIV experiences the initial flu-like symptoms. The flu symptoms are due to increased copies of HIV and the widespread infection in the body. The spread of the infection seems to have occurred as the narrator shows advanced staged symptoms with night sweats, persistent cough, diarrhoea, and weight loss (HIV.gov, 2020).

The narrator seems angry that the virus is progressing now as he tries to fight back and stay healthy. The narrator calls home again; in fact, it appears that he or she is phoning home more frequently. Perhaps it is now when the narrator would talk about his illness to his or her parents. The narrator feels so feeble that there is no mood now for sex, or perhaps the sexual partner of the narrator is gone.

Get mad. Fight back.

Call home. Rest well.

Don't cry. Take charge.

No sex. Eat right. (Dixon, 1989, lines 15-18)

Assonance appears to be in line 15 with the repetition of the vowel sound /æ/ in words “mad” and “back”. There is also assonance between lines 17 and 18 with the repetition of the diphthong /ai/ in “cry” and “right”. Perhaps the narrator is taking charge of everything without the support of his or her family. Since it never states anything about people visiting, all we know is that the narrator phones home. As Christensen (2016) explained, during the 1980s people were so afraid of AIDS that some nurses refused to take meals to hospitalised patients, while doctors debated whether they had a moral obligation to treat them. Even the parents of HIV positives refused to see their sick children.

Afterwards, the narrator has trouble breathing, to the point of having experienced a temporary loss of consciousness and goes to the hospital to get a CAT scan.

No air. Breathe in.

Breathe in. No air.

Black out. White rooms.

Head hot. Feet cold.

No work. Eat right.

CAT scan. Chin up. (Dixon, 1989, lines 25-30)

Lines 25 and 26 are repeated but with the difference that the order of the iambs of each verse is reversed. Therefore “No air” is the first iamb in line 25 and the last iamb in line 26. Which effectively expresses that the narrator has collapsed since he cannot breathe. Also, Melvin Dixon plays with the meaning of “Chin up”. In line 2 of the first stanza “Chin ups” meant to exercise. But in line 30 “Chin up” means encouraging someone to be brave and not sad. In this case, the narrator is telling it to himself as he or she tries very hard not to be mentally defeated. However, the results of the CAT scan are not good; the narrator has thin blood. Therefore, the number of platelets has dropped drastically. “Thin blood. Sore lungs. / Mouth dry. Mind gone” (lines 33-34). Thin blood, also known as thrombocytopenia, can result in potentially life-threatening internal bleeding and might mean that the HIV infection has advanced to further stages (Cichocki, 2021).

The narrator wonders how long he or she will stay alive, conscious that his or her life expectancy has fallen.

Six months? Three weeks?

Can't eat. No air.

Today? Tonight?

It waits. For me. (Dixon, 1989, lines 35-38)

The poem ends with the narrator begging to his or her heart not to stop as he or she tries to stay calm doing breathing exercises. “Sweet heart. Don't stop. / Breath in. Breath out” (Dixon, 1989, lines 39-40). Melvin has played again with two words. “Sweet” and “heart”. At the beginning of line 6, when the narrator was healthier, “sweetheart” referred to his or her lover. But at the end of the poem in line 39 the narrator's health has degraded and says “sweet heart” instead, as if the battle that the narrator is experiencing from this illness has changed the order of priorities. The narrator, therefore, begs his or her heart to keep beating.

In conclusion, the poem shows the internal thoughts of someone whose illness is getting

worse, which also reminds us of today's COVID-19 patients sitting in the ICU. The ICU patients might be telling themselves the exact words that the narrator has used, such as "Breath in. Breath out" or "Today? Tonight?". The lack of other people in the poem might suggest that Melvin Dixon wanted to convey that a sick person must face the illness alone in the end. This same idea of facing an illness alone has happened to COVID-19 patients, whose family have not been allowed to come for visits.

## 7. Conclusions

Viruses have been on Earth since before humanity existed, even dinosaurs suffered them. But we, unlike dinosaurs, could find ways to combat and even prevent these illnesses. We should praise science for its discoveries. In 2020 a new disease came to public knowledge, and doctors and scientists developed vaccines within a year! That is entirely unheard of since, on average, vaccines take 10 to 15 years to be developed. As of now, millions of people in the world are getting vaccinated every day, which will decrease the opportunity for the virus to spread. I hope that soon it will be possible for humanity to get back to normal. Closed businesses, curfews, and fear of getting infected will be a thing of the past. However, we should not feel like the war against viruses is won. History predicts that new viruses will come and go. Let us not forget the other viruses that already exist today. The artists' work will also remain to remind us of their experience, as long as people care to read them. The purpose of my study was to look back through the history of the epidemics and compare the experiences of people in history to the experience of people today. Because sometimes, we cannot note what we are experiencing, and we cannot find words for what we are just living. It would not have been fair to only analyse the poems and not the history of each selected disease, from one of the oldest, the Plague of Athens, to an illness still alive today, AIDS. From my analysis, it seems that what our ancestors experienced has not changed from our experience today. As if history could repeat itself, events described centuries ago remind us of what we are experiencing now.

In *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius, with a serious and scientific tone, explained that viruses are just part of life and there can be good and bad things in the air. Animals and humans can be infected, as we have observed with minks. Cities become less crowded when there are epidemic outbreaks. Some nowadays are trying cold water immersion to improve their immune systems, as they did in the Plague of Athens' times. But, our scientists, unlike theirs, have created vaccines to protect us from the disease. Still, many people are dying, and during the worst days of the coronavirus epidemic, hospitals and morgues were overflowing with lifeless bodies. Additionally, burial traditions were altered for various reasons, such as a lack of coffins and little or no attendance at funerals.

In Thomas Nashe's poem "Adieu, Farewell, Earth's Bliss", we get to see and feel the point of view of someone who is approaching death due to the plague. Although sad as it is, the message is comforting because the narrator accepts that he or she is about to die and believes that there is life beyond death. Those thoughts could be from a person of today who is approaching their end, either from COVID-19 or any other disease. The poem makes us

realise that nothing can escape death, and we need to understand that life on Earth is just temporary.

In Montagu's poem "Saturday: The Small-pox, Flavia", we can see that some people will never be thankful for having survived a deadly disease, as in the case of Flavia, who is ashamed of the scar marks on her face after having recovered from smallpox. Today's recovered patients from COVID-19 might suffer far worse consequences such as memory loss and cognitive impairments.

In Little's poem "The Calf Path", we are reminded that the distrust of vaccines is not a new movement. Despite the enormous success that vaccines have achieved with, for example, the eradication of the smallpox disease, doctors and governments who encourage the use of vaccines are still untrusted to this day.

In Young's poem *Antonia* we can see a very detailed fictional panorama of what happened and how people reacted to the news that the plague had come to Malta. In epidemics, natural things such as helping someone or hugging your relatives turn into a scary thing to do. Also, in times of epidemic outbreaks, businesses must apply high-quality sanitary standards to reduce the risk of consumers getting infected, as so tragically happened in Malta, where the public was infected by purchasing contaminated bread from men carrying the disease.

Lastly, In Dixon's poem "Heartbeats", we have a similar view of someone approaching death as in Nashe's poem. However, in Melvin Dixon's poem, the disease is slowly killing its host, and he or she is not ready to depart. The poem's rhythm is particularly remarkable because it resembles the heart rate and consequently moves us to a hospital as we can imagine that we hear the beep sound of a monitored patient whose life is at stake. The solitude of facing death partially alone and the difficulty of breathing that the narrator suffers might remind us of those COVID-19 patients in the ICU whose lives are at risk at this very moment.

To conclude, as Adrienne Rich expressed on the dust cover of the book *Poets for life: Seventy-six poets respond to AIDS*, "poets push language ahead into the danger zones we've so often inhabited in silence" (1989). The selected poems from Lucretius, Nashe, Montagu, Little, Young and Dixon have made it possible, as only poets can do, to give me the words to stoically describe an awful historical experience that we are currently living.

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