

Reflections on Toxicity in Edgar Allan Poe's Plague Narratives and their Relation to the U.S. Response to Covid-19

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The study of two of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "King Pest" and "The Masque of the Red Death," and their depictions of plagues in relation to toxic discourse has revealed power dynamics very much relevant to our world outside of literature, with the American response to Covid-19 and the U.S. President's contraction of the virus at the forefront. While using the leading theory on toxic discourse by Lawrence Buell as a guideline, a broader definition of toxic discourse was used for this analysis where toxicity can be a biological or a cultural term, e.g. a virus versus toxic masculinity. Using this view on toxicity in culture and literature as a lens, previous research on the texts by Poe was interpreted and revealed the very clear involvement of these texts in toxic discourse.

What was then particularly interesting is that the biological toxicity of the texts was not the only thing that can be connected to the Covid-19 pandemic and its unfolding in the U.S. The notion of a social plague occurring during a medical plague examined by Rene Girard was very visible in both texts, and especially "The Masque of the Red Death" becomes a literary mirror to what might have happened in the course of the President's hospitalization. In the story, the rich aristocrats surrounding Prince Prospero, as well as the Prince himself, die from the very thing they secluded themselves from - regardless of their precautions. They suffer just like the people outside their safe haven whom they purposefully shut out. The text, written in 1842, is as relevant as ever in 2020 and immediately gives cause to remember the words of Oscar Wilde: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (Wilde, p. 55).

Sources:

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