

Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



اقلام في العزلة: تجليات الردود الشعرية للوباء العالمي

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الخلاصة

أثر انتشار الجائحة العالمية بشكل عميق على جوانب مختلفة من حياة الإنسان، بما في ذلك الفنون ومنها الشعر. ظهر الشعر، بصفته نوعاً أدبياً، كوسيلة تعبير مؤثرة خلال هذه الأوقات الصعبة. يتناول هذا البحث عالم شعر الجائحة، ويتفحص السبل التي استجاب بها الشعراء وعبروا من خلالها عن الأزمة. يدرس البحث خصائص شعر الجائحة الذي نُشر في مجموعة مختارة بعنوان "معاً في الغرابة: إجابة شعراء أمريكا على الجائحة"، والتي حررتها أليس كوين ونُشرت في عام 2020 خلال ذروة الجائحة في الوقت الذي كان العالم يجهل كيف ستنتهي الأزمة.

يستكشف هذا البحث المواضيع والعواطف والتقنيات الفنية التي اعتمد عليها الشعراء لتجسيد جوهر تجربة الجائحة وذلك عن طريق تحليل قصائد مختارة من المجموعة المذكورة. يؤكد البحث الدور الفريد والمهم للشعر في المواساة وتحقيق الارتباط كونه يمثل متنفساً للتعبير عن مشاعر العزلة وفقدان الأمان. يناقش البحث أيضاً الأهمية الأدبية والتاريخية لشعر الجائحة، مؤكداً تعزيز التآزر الجماعي وإلهام القارئ الصمود بوجه المأساة ليصبح شاهداً على القوة البشرية. لذا ومن

Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



خلال تحليل هذه النصوص الشعرية، يكشف البحث قوة الكلمة (مكتوبة او مطبوعة) في مواجهة اصعب التحديات وايجاد الحلول وتجاوز الازمات في عصرنا هذا.

Abstract:

The outbreak of the global pandemic has had a profound impact on various aspects of human life, including the arts. Poetry, as a literary form, has emerged as a powerful means of expression during these challenging times. This paper delves into the realm of pandemic poetry, examining the ways in which poets have responded to and reflected upon the crisis. This study examines the characteristics of pandemic poetry published in the anthology titled *Together in Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*, edited by Alice Quinn which was published in 2020 during the peak of the pandemic when a definitive resolution was yet to be ascertained.

Through an analysis of selected poems, this study explores the themes, emotions, and artistic techniques employed by poets to capture the essence of the pandemic experience. It considers the unique role of poetry in providing solace, connection, and a creative outlet amidst isolation and uncertainty. Additionally, the paper discusses the broader literary significance and legacy of pandemic poetry, shedding light on its potential to inspire resilience, foster collective healing, and serve as a testament to the human spirit. By engaging with these poetic responses, we gain insight into the power of words to confront, process, and transcend the challenges of our time.

Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

1. Introduction

Pandemics and wars have always served as compelling wellsprings of inspiration for writers. These extraordinary occurrences, with their intricate ramifications and profound emotional depths, offer fertile ground for creative exploration. Pandemics provide a platform for writers to delve into themes of fear, resilience, and the delicate nature of life. Wars present opportunities to examine conflict, power dynamics, and the quest for meaning amidst turmoil. Through their literary endeavors, they capture the very essence of these moments, resonating with readers and leaving an indelible impact:

In trauma, the horrific moment arrives with such world-shattering force that it scrambles the brain's function, and the victim is unable to process the experience in a normal way. Trauma forces the self into





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

hiding, and while the sensory manifold keeps “recording” sights, sounds, smells, and feelings, the brain fails to work them through. (Pederson, 2014: p.335)

Despite being distinct traumatic phenomena, a pandemic and a war exhibit several resemblances in terms of their influence on society, human experience, and collective consciousness. First and foremost, both a pandemic and a war disrupt the normal functioning of societies, introducing widespread uncertainty, fear, and a sense of vulnerability among individuals. In both cases, people are confronted with the fragility of life and the imperative to confront an unseen, unyielding adversary. The pervasive nature of the threats posed by a pandemic and a war engenders an atmosphere of apprehension and heightens the shared sense of vulnerability.

Secondly, both a pandemic and a war engender severe consequences for public health. While casualties in a war predominantly arise from direct violence, a pandemic spreads through a contagious disease, causing widespread illness, suffering, and death. In both scenarios, healthcare systems become overwhelmed, resources are strained, and medical professionals face formidable challenges in providing adequate care. Additionally, both a pandemic and a war can result in significant social and economic disruptions. They engender the loss of livelihoods, the breakdown of industries, and the displacement of populations. The ramifications encompass economic recessions, unemployment, and the uprooting of individuals and communities, leading to profound social and economic inequalities. Furthermore, both events tend to evoke a collective response and instill a sense of solidarity among people. During times of war or a pandemic, individuals often unite in the face of adversity, seeking solace and support from one another. Communities rally together to offer mutual aid, share resources, and exemplify resilience and compassion.

Lastly, both a pandemic and a war possess the potential to mold collective memory and leave enduring impacts on societies. They become integral components of a nation's historical narrative, influencing cultural production, art, literature, and shaping the trajectory of future generations.

Throughout history, authors have engaged with the theme of epidemics and pandemics, delving into the profound impact these crises have on individuals and societies. From Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722 to Ling Ma's *Severance* in 2018, these works offer diverse perspectives on the human experience during times of widespread



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



disease. Defoe's novel provides a fictionalized account of the 1665 Great Plague of London, vividly portraying the experiences of individuals and illuminating the social, economic, and psychological effects of the plague (Zimmerman, 2020). It serves as a historical testament to the resilience and struggles faced by people in the face of an epidemic.

In the mid-20th century, Albert Camus's *The Plague* captures the existential angst and absurdity of life during an epidemic (Kaplan, 2022: p.xii). Set in the town of Oran, Algeria, the novel follows characters as they grapple with isolation, fear, and the search for meaning amidst the chaos of a plague outbreak. Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* offers a poignant reflection on the 1918 influenza pandemic. Drawing from her own experience of contracting the flu, Porter weaves a deeply personal narrative that delves into the themes of illness, mortality, and the fragility of life.

Moving into the realm of magical realism, Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* portrays love and desire against the backdrop of cholera outbreaks in 19th and early 20th-century Colombia. Although not explicitly focused on a pandemic, Márquez's lyrical prose captures the resilience of the human spirit amidst the threat of disease (Frazier, 1989). José Saramago's *Blindness* takes a dystopian approach, imagining a world struck by a mysterious epidemic of blindness (Petrov & Marchalik, 2020). Saramago explores the breakdown of societal norms and raises profound questions about human nature, morality, and the search for hope in the face of darkness. Ling Ma's *Severance* blends elements of satire and dystopia, presenting a pandemic called "Shen Fever" that compels individuals to repetitively perform routine tasks until death (Michaels, 2019: p.141).

Across the annals of history, poets have frequently sought solace in their art to delve into and express the consequences of epidemics on society. These poetic voices afford us an extraordinary insight into the human condition amidst times of pervasive illness, presenting contemplations on apprehension, grief, fortitude, and optimism. Spanning eras from antiquity to contemporary times, numerous poets have bequeathed potent literary creations that endure as poignant testaments to the human experience.

One notable example from ancient times is the Roman poet Lucretius, who lived during the first century BCE. In his philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), Lucretius contemplates the nature of disease and its effects on individuals and communities. In a translation of the long poem, he says: "The power of diseases has been found,/ Which comes in from without" (Lucretius, 2022). He discusses





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

the fear and panic that epidemics can incite and delves into the scientific explanations for the spread of diseases, emphasizing the importance of reason and knowledge in the face of uncertainty.

Jumping to the 17th century, we encounter John Donne, a metaphysical poet whose works delved into themes of love, spirituality, and mortality (Dixit, 2020). Donne's experiences during a smallpox outbreak informed his writing, resulting in works like "The First Anniversary of the Plague" and "Death Be Not Proud." In these poems, Donne grapples with the fear of death and the transient nature of life, finding solace in spiritual faith and resilience (Shuttleton, 2007: p.41).

In the 19th century, tuberculosis, known as consumption, was a widespread epidemic that affected many lives. John Keats, who tragically succumbed to the disease at a young age, crafted powerful works that reflected his personal experience with illness and mortality. Keats's poems, such as "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn," delve into themes of transience, beauty, and the fleeting nature of life. In the former he says, "The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan" (Keats, 1819). Through vivid imagery and poignant language, Keats confronts the fragility of existence in the face of disease.

In the aftermath of the 1918 influenza pandemic, William Butler Yeats penned his influential poem "The Second Coming" (1919), delving into themes of chaos, uncertainty, and societal breakdown. Reflecting the disorientation and fear experienced during a devastating global crisis, Yeats captures the haunting aftermath of the crisis, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (Yeats, 1919). His verses evoke a profound sense of unease and the collective feeling of being uprooted from familiar realities, highlighting the lasting impact of the disease on the human psyche.

Moving closer to the present, we encounter Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" (1938) contemplates the Hawk's Nest incident, an industrial disaster that exposed workers to silica dust. In this poem, Rukeyser explores the epidemic-like health crisis that befell the affected community.

What one word must never be said?
Dead, and these men fight off our dying,
cough in the theatres of the war. (Rukeyser, 1938)

With poignant words, she sheds light on the profound consequences of the disaster, giving voice to the silenced and raising awareness about the



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



far-reaching impact of industrial tragedies. Through her evocative verses, Rukeyser underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the long-term effects of such crises.

In more recent times, the AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century inspired numerous poets to respond to the crisis. The works of poets such as Thom Gunn, Mark Doty, and Essex Hemphill grapple with themes of loss, stigma, activism, and the celebration of queer lives. These poets address the destructive consequences of the disease while also amplifying the fortitude, vigor, and affection found within the impacted communities.

Three poignant poems intricately delve into the multifaceted dimensions of the AIDS crisis and its profound impact on individuals. Mark Doty's "My Life as a Virus" (1995) artfully employs metaphorical language to navigate the complex experience of living with HIV/AIDS, intricately exploring themes of seclusion, vulnerability, and the ceaseless pursuit of human connection amid the daunting epidemic. Tory Dent's "HIV, Mon Amour" (1999) poignantly unveils a personal and introspective journey, candidly delving into the emotional and physical toll caused by the disease, while fearlessly confronting the pervasive stigma and discrimination entwined with its narrative. Gwendolyn Brooks' "Elegy" (2000), though not explicitly centered on the AIDS crisis, assumes significance within an anthology that resonates with the epidemic's narrative. This elegiac poem mourns the loss of a beloved figure and illuminates the enduring reverberations of their absence. Collectively, these evocative works illuminate the multifarious experiences, intricate emotions, and formidable trials encountered by individuals living with HIV/AIDS, fostering a broader and nuanced dialogue surrounding the epidemic's impact.

In the 21st century, the world experienced a devastating pandemic called COVID-19, which led to global lockdowns and a significant disruption of normal life. During this time, a multitude of poetry and research emerged, capturing the essence of the pandemic and enriching the literary landscape. This study focuses on pandemic poetry, specifically exploring the characteristics found in the anthology *Together in Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic*. Edited by Alice Quinn¹ and published in 2020, at the height of the pandemic when uncertainty prevailed, this anthology features a diverse group of poets

¹ The entirety of the pandemic poems under analysis originates from the aforementioned collection. Consequently, each poem will be referred to using its respective title and the corresponding page number within the anthology. Furthermore, line numbers shall be provided exclusively for the quoted passages.



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

from various ethnicities and backgrounds. Their works offer a wide range of poetic expressions, making them essential subjects for thorough investigation.

2. Contemporary Pandemic Poetry

The collection of pandemic poetry showcases a wide range of themes, styles, and perspectives, each poem retaining its unique essence while sharing some common threads and similarities. At its core, the collection revolves around the COVID-19 pandemic and its profound impact on human life, evoking a plethora of emotions, experiences, and challenges. One of the prevalent themes explored throughout the poems is the reflection on isolation and confinement. The verses delve into the experiences of physical separation from loved ones, the implications of lockdown measures on daily life, and the emotional toll of social distancing. In "An Apartment" by Noah Warren (Quinn, 2020: p.152), the poet reflects on mundane moments and domestic scenes, revealing the impact of isolation on personal experiences.

We split a glass of wine, another.
Now you're stretched out in the other room, playing on my phone.
In a minute, or five, I'll rinse dishes, wipe down the splattered stove.
In twenty, or twenty-five, I'll join you, and we'll talk more, or watch
something stupid: Hereditary got you into horror, with the world
outside so bad. Afterward, who knows: maybe nothing,
(lines 11-16)

Meanwhile, "The Onlookers" by Christian Wiman (Quinn, 2020: p.155) uses sparse language and short lines to convey the sense of detachment and uncertainty associated with isolation during a crisis.

Whatever it means it doesn't mean us.
Whoever it touches we cannot save.
We wash our hands, gorge on news,
and keep six feet between us,
implying, while denying, a grave. (lines 1-5)

Loss and grief are also significant themes that emerge in the collection. The poems contemplate the profound sense of loss brought about by the pandemic, exploring themes of death, mourning, and the absence of loved ones. In "Stones and Stars" by Jeffrey Yang (Quinn, 2020: pp.159-160), the poet reflects on the concept of mortality and the



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



transient nature of existence, emphasizing the fleeting moments of life. In contrast, "Shine" by Kevin Young (Quinn, 2020: p.162) conveys a sense of urgency and introspection as the poet contemplates mortality and longing for connection, while watching the city lights from afar.

Amidst the challenges of the pandemic, certain poems find solace and beauty in nature, symbolizing hope, renewal, and connection. In "Naturally" by Rosanna Warren, (Quinn, 2020: p.153) the poet contemplates the healing aspects of nature and its interconnectedness with human life.

Rising in the dark for senior pandemic shopping,
we drive east into the spruce-silhouetted dawn
watching the sky stain slowly raspberry as the molten
copper disk of sun floats up over the highway,
a star, a continuous stream of thermonuclear explosions,
one of billions in our galaxy, which is one
among billions of other galaxies, our sun
lighting our way down the exit ramp into the Walmart
(lines 1-8)

Nature is also a motif symbolizing resilience and continuity amidst the pandemic's turmoil as in "Voyages" by Nathalie Handal (Quinn, 2020, p. 53-54) which depicts imagery of a "an infinite garden," (line 5) "needles under your feet," (line 13) and "floating" water, (line 15) evoking sensations of journey and self-discovery. Similarly, "Canal Nocturne" by Rex Wilder (Quinn, 2020: p.154) reflects on a nighttime walk and explores the relationship between nature and personal thoughts: "Without and within. Only the harmless crabs and sea slugs,/ Silhouettes and shadows, tenant the three feet deep." (Wilder, "Canal Nocturne", lines 7-8)

Time and death emerge as another recurrent motif, emphasizing the importance of cherishing fleeting moments in "Matzoh" by Gail Mazur (Quinn, 2020: pp.89-90). The poet contemplates: "Such questions never/ occurred in what today we call 'normal times'/ when I'd bring cut flowers" (lines 21-23). The collection further exhibits personal experiences and reflections on the pandemic. Poems like "Uncle Juncon, the Baby Stones" by Tess Taylor (Quinn, 2020: p.147) offer intimate and emotional reflections on family history and connections, intertwining past and present experiences: "Now your ashes wait. We cannot meet/ to bury you. A continent away, I walk" (Taylor, "Uncle Juncon," lines 12-13). In "Poem for Rupi Kaur" by Matthew Zapruder, (Quinn, 2020: pp.163-164)





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

the poet combines personal reflection with social commentary, exploring themes of love, parenthood, and the challenges of the modern world:

again I do the math
will I live long enough
to see him thrive
in what sort of world
we are living (lines 20-24)

Beyond the pandemic, the poems touch upon themes like loss and mortality. "Existential" by Anne Waldman (Quinn, 2020: pp.148-151) portrays a fragmented and enigmatic style, reflecting on existential contemplations and the uncertainties of life.

He wrote to me a last note
Of horror of corona
The excruciating headaches
The blank wall
And the mind, amused?
*Where are my people,
My real people?* (lines 103-109)

Human connection and isolation emerge as central themes as well. In ":[a ragged white moth passes by]:" by Brenda Hillman, (Quinn, 2020: pp.59-60) the motif of mosses on buildings symbolizes determination and survival during isolation: "each with a certain commitment to survive" (line 11)

Additionally, the collection explores social inequality and injustice, shedding light on disparities in access to healthcare and societal divisions. "Six Months from Patient Zero" by Eliza Griswold (Quinn, 2020: p.51) reflects on the fear and uncertainty of "who is salve/ and who is threat," (lines 4-5) capturing the broader societal anxieties calling the humans "avatars" (line 8). The poems in question can be categorized into distinct thematic clusters, providing valuable insights into the profound impact of the global pandemic on artistic expression and human experiences. The first category, 'Pandemic Experience and Emotions,' encompasses poems that poignantly delve into the multifaceted experience of living through a pandemic, capturing the gamut of emotions like fear, uncertainty, isolation, longing, and profound self-reflection. For instance, "May Day" by Nicholas Christopher (Quinn, 2020: p.26) explores the haunting cries or "demented song" (line 1) of a woman amidst the backdrop of a



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



pandemic-stricken city, evoking themes of mental distress and social isolation as she is “unseen invisible out of sight/ maybe no more out of her mind/ than anyone else” (lines 9-11). Similarly, "After the Apocalypse" by Ama Codjoe (Quinn, 2020: pp.27-30) presents a diverse array of perspectives and experiences after an apocalyptic event, touching upon themes of desire, motherhood, rage, grief, and personal transformation amidst devastation. It is important to recognize that the poem's publication coincides with the lockdown period, signifying that the depicted scenarios solely exist within the poet's imagination. The poet engages in daydreaming, envisioning events that might unfold "after the apocalypse," a phrase she repeats at the start of each stanza.

The second category, ‘Human Connection and Relationships,’ focuses on poems that underscore the vital significance of human bonds, particularly in the context of social distancing measures. These poems exemplify themes of love, empathy, and the profound yearning for physical touch and intimacy as a means of navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic. In Joshua Bennett's poem "Dad Poem," (Quinn, 2020: p.13) a father-to-be experiences emotional turmoil during the pandemic ultrasound visit with his partner. Denied entry due to visitor restrictions, he grapples with the inability to witness the significant moment.

No visitors allowed

is what the masked woman behind
the desk says only seconds
after me and your mother
arrive for the ultrasound. *But I'm the father;*
I explain, like it means something
defensible. (lines 1-7)

The couple holds hands, cherishing their connection as they imagine their child together. The father feels helpless and uncertain about his role in the child's life amidst a world catastrophe and the absence of physical touch, “What can I be to you now” (line 25). The poem reflects on love, separation, and the struggle to form connections in a time of pandemic-induced restrictions, leaving the father contemplating his parenthood in challenging circumstances. George Bilgere's poem "Facetime" (Quinn, 2020: pp.19-20) delves into the yearning for connection amidst pandemic-induced isolation. Mundane conversations between the speaker and his wife provide reassurance. Simultaneously, animals venture into deserted human spaces, hinting at their desire for interaction. The Tokyo





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

Aquarium's garden eels, shown human faces via iPads, evoke compassion for their longing.

And as I stand in my driveway tonight,
grilling, I feel grateful to the eels.
How nice of them to miss us, after all we've done.
Such magnanimity in a beast so small.
I decide to give them a call. (lines 35-39)

The poem reflects the universal craving for connection, extending beyond human boundaries. Nature's quietness during the pandemic amplifies the significance of reaching out, acknowledging the interconnectedness of all living beings. In the end, the speaker's decision to call the eels symbolizes the profound impact simple gestures of connection can have in a time of separation.

The third category, 'Existential Reflection and Mortality,' contemplates existential themes, including the frailty of life, the awareness of mortality, and the ephemeral nature of human existence. Brooks Haxton's "Equinox at Home, 2020" (Quinn, 2020: pp.55-57) is a poignant example of this category, juxtaposing intricate details of bird behavior with reflections on human relationships and the challenges of parenting, alluding to the complexities of life even amid adversity. The poem lists several bird species and observes that, in usual circumstances, the female is responsible for raising the offspring alone after mating. However, in the poet's situation, the husband is still present, yet it is the children who have deserted both parents.

I was thinking. You and I have mated for life,
and the children in our case abandon the parents
after twenty years or so. Not really. Not
abandon . They still visit when they can. (lines 53-56)

The fourth category, 'Resilience and Hope,' exemplifies poems that exude resilience, hope, and the intrinsic human ability to endure and overcome challenges. Through these poems, themes of courage, perseverance, and the indomitable human spirit emerge, providing solace and encouragement in the face of adversity. An illustration is evident in Eliza Griswold's "Six Months from Patient Zero," (Quinn, 2020: p.51) which explores the underlying fear and uncertainty pervasive in society during a pandemic and portrays the human capacity to remain vigilant



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



and endure amidst the outbreak. Griswold says, "To be patient is to be willing/ to endure. To forbear." (lines 14-15)

The pandemic imagery portrayed in this collection of poems conveys a profound and multi-faceted experience of living through a global health crisis. The poems explore the use of masks and physical distancing, the impact on nature and the environment, the significance of everyday objects and routines, and the emotions of loss and grief. These elements create a vivid and relatable portrayal of the pandemic's effects on individuals and society. The use of masks is a problem in itself as Ocana suggests:

Face masks not only disrupt access to the acoustic and visual aspects of speech, but they also break apart the social aspect of the face-to-face communication (smiles, frowns, smirks, etc.) that serve as a subtle nonverbal cues, context for verbal content, and emotion. (Ocana, Martines, & Orazi, 2022: p.150)

The poets effectively employ various literary devices to enhance the imagery and emotional impact of their verses. Imagery plays a pivotal role in conveying the tangible and intangible aspects of the pandemic experience. Through sensory details and evocative language, readers are transported into the scenes and emotions of the pandemic. For example, in "May Day" by Nicholas Christopher, (Quinn, 2020: p.26) the imagery of "a woman's demented song" (line 1) juxtaposed with the death toll in the city portrays the sense of despair and tragedy.

Metaphors and similes are used to create deeper layers of meaning and engage the readers' imagination. In "Weather Heard as Music" by Timothy Donnelly, (Quinn, 2020: p.36) the metaphor of a "great night wind blows hard against the building" (line 1) likened to being at sea or war heightens the intensity and turbulence of the pandemic's impact. The poet uses another touching metaphor to enrich the image of sickness and death:

cake crumbs on the tabletop,
rubble waiting to be poked through a little further
before the froth of the wave comes to shuffle it off
into the dark (lines 14-17)

Symbolism further enriches the poems, representing abstract ideas or emotions through tangible objects or actions. In "Desert Lily" by





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



Rigoberto Gonzalez, (Quinn, 2020: p.46) the "white dress" (line 1) symbolizes a past that cannot be regained, emphasizing the theme of loss. Repetition and enjambment are utilized to create rhythm and emphasize key ideas in the poems. In "Flowers for Tanisha" by Rachel Eliza Griffiths, (Quinn, 2020: pp.49-50) the repetition of "I can" reinforces the speaker's resilience and determination to endure despite challenging circumstances. Enjambment, as seen in "COVID-19 Lockdown, Easter Weekend" by George Green, (Quinn, 2020: p.47) creates a sense of flow and continuity, enhancing the poem's narrative. Other poems that use enjambment heavily are Joshua Bennet's "Dad Poem" and Aleksandar Hemon's "The Future of Everything" (Quinn, 2020: pp.13, 58).

The discussion of the most prominent literary devices reveals the poets' masterful use of language and poetic techniques to evoke emotions and enhance the poems' overall impact. These devices contribute to the distinct styles of each poem, encompassing straightforward narratives, contemplative reflections, introspective observations, and enigmatic fragments.

Each poem possesses a unique blend of stylistic elements, demonstrating the poets' creativity and artistry in conveying the complexities of the pandemic experience. By employing these literary devices, the collection of poems becomes a powerful medium for reflecting on the human condition during times of crisis. Through vivid imagery and skillful use of literary devices, the poems provide readers with a rich and thought-provoking exploration of the pandemic's impact on individuals and society as a whole. Such uniqueness can be evident in lines like:

(Will) (each) (word) (have) (to) (be) (masked) (?)

Will there be poetry in insecurity?

(Julia Alvarez, "How will this pandemic affect poetry?": p.3, lines 3-4)

Stylistically speaking, the analyzed poems offer diverse approaches to poetic expression, each possessing unique qualities that distinguish them from one another. "Still Life" by Ellen Bass (Quinn, 2020: p.11) stands out for its remarkable form and content. Focusing on "Coral tulips," (line 4) the poem paints a vivid snapshot of beauty and transience amid the pandemic.

these open mouths reach out
on their supple stems,
revealing yellow throats, golden



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



pistil and black anthers wheeling. (lines 6-9)

Employing rich imagery and meticulous attention to detail, it conveys the essence of impermanence and the fragility of life. This poem's exploration of nature within the context of the pandemic adds a distinctive perspective to the collection.

Regarding uniqueness, "If Indeed I Am Ill, Brother" by Julia Guez (Quinn, 2020: p.52) stands apart from the other poems. While the majority of the collection centers on personal reflections, emotional responses, and societal critiques, Guez's poem adopts a more abstract and introspective approach. It delves into the realm of language and communication, pondering the significance of words and their ability to capture the complexity of emotions.

Tell me about London, the weather there
in spring outside the walls of the Great Hall.
[. . .] These sonatas, these scores, tell me
what of them will last when everything falls away –
(lines 1-2, 7-8)

The poem raises questions about the limitations of language in conveying experiences, delving into the profound nature of the human condition. Through poetic language and metaphysical themes, it offers readers a contemplative invitation to explore the self, language, and the world amid the pandemic. In terms of style, "Two Days in March" by John Okrent (Quinn, 2020: pp.112-113) displays a unique form, adhering to a traditional sonnet structure and being part of the *Corona Sonnets* series. The use of a specific rhyme scheme and structure typical of sonnets distinguishes this poem, as it engages with the contemporary theme of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the poem employs descriptive language and vivid imagery to capture the emotional and experiential aspects of the pandemic, further enhancing its distinct style. Moreover, "::::[a ragged white moth passes by]:::" by Brenda Hillman (Quinn, 2020: pp.59-60) showcases a unique style in its unconventional title and form. With fragmented lines and atypical line breaks, the poem evokes a sense of disjointedness and open-endedness. The language, rich with imagery and enigmatic phrases, beckons readers to delve into its multi-layered meanings.

On & on
the little beasts visited. No
666 for them. The rat & bacteria & the sparrow's gold corona.





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

(lines 13-15)

The distinctive structure and blend of natural and metaphorical imagery convey an introspective exploration of human experience in a fragmented world. Similarly, "an inoculation against innocence" by Evie Shockley (Quinn, 2020: pp.141-143) stands out for its experimental use of language and fragmented structure. Challenging traditional poetic conventions, the poem's disjointed nature reflects the chaotic and uncertain times of the pandemic. The fusion of different voices, references, and perspectives further enhances its unique style, capturing the multifaceted experiences during the crisis.

up our groceries and delivering	our meals, are we eating our stress
or theirs? what is the value of a	healthy black person on the closed
market? meanwhile, corporations	take another step towards person-
hood, as they reveal that they, too,	are vulnerable to this disease. but
why are they the only ones to get out	on bail? will the folks who can stay
at home pay the ones who can't? will	the hordes hoarding purell remain
70% selfish? and what good is hand-	wringing when the virus looks
like cotton, spreads like dandelions,	and the past's poisonous pesticides

Figure (1) An image of "an inoculation against innocence" by Evie Shockley

3. Psychological and Emotional Impact:

The COVID-19 pandemic has left an indelible mark on human history, affecting every aspect of life. Amid the chaos and uncertainty, poets have sought solace and expression in their art, creating a diverse range of pandemic poetry that captures the profound psychological suffering experienced during these times: "trauma is memorable and describable" (Pederson, 2014: p.334). The selection of poems above delves into the raw emotions of fear, loss, isolation, and hopelessness, reflecting the struggles faced by individuals worldwide. Joshua Bennett's "Dad Poem" (Quinn, 2020: p.13) encapsulates the intense emotional turmoil faced by a father during a prenatal ultrasound amidst the pandemic. The poet is devastated when denied the opportunity to be physically present during



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



the momentous event, leaving him caught between astonishment and rage: "Caught/ in the space between astonishment/ & rage, we hold hands a minute" (lines 9-11). The poem portrays the anguish of separation, highlighting the emotional weight of a time without touch, a reality faced by many during lockdowns and social distancing. April Bernard's "Haunt" (Quinn, 2020: p.14) personifies the pandemic's impact on individuals, with the poet's mother returning as a haunting presence during the lockdown: "Six months after death, my mother/ has come to haunt me" (lines 1-2). The woman's spectral figure invades the poet's life, engaging in mundane tasks, symbolizing the anxiety and fear that engulfs people's lives during this time" "infinite unimportance as we sail/ about the house" (lines 16-17). The poem emphasizes the ironic and paradoxical nature of a pandemic that isolates people while revealing the interconnectedness of human suffering.

In "The New Nice" by Danielle Chapman, (Quinn, 2020: p.25) the pandemic forces a reflection on the meaning of niceness and the necessity to prioritize the home. The poet rejects the social norms of maintaining politeness and focuses on self-preservation within the confines of her home.

A sunny day, bicycling neighbor gangs, loud boys
playing not quite six feet away mean to
harass this house? That's not very nice.
But this is my property. (lines 14-17)

The poem underlines the struggle to find a balance between personal boundaries and societal expectations, and how the pandemic has forced people to reconsider their roles and responsibilities.

Equally important, Nicole Cooley's "AT CVS Wearing a Mask I Buy Plastic Easter Eggs for My Daughters" (Quinn, 2020: p.34) speaks to the palpable fear and concern for one's family's wellbeing during the pandemic. The poet's anxiety is evident as she recalls previous moments of grief and loss (of her mother) while being immersed in a crisis: "How I wish feeling terrible felt useful, as it did when I was a teenager" (line 13). The poem captures the juxtaposition of everyday activities (e.g. "I scrub the plastic eggs, stuff them with chocolate, listen to/ the news"- lines 10-11) with the backdrop of death tolls (e.g. "I remember wanting to snap the heads off/ daffodils because my mother was dead"- lines 8-9) and uncertainty, highlighting the psychological impact of living amidst a pandemic.

Edward Hirsch's "Eight People" (Quinn, 2020: p.61) conspicuously mourns the loss of human connection and community due to the





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

pandemic. The poet reflects on the increasing sense of isolation and detachment from the world, as the pandemic reshapes human interactions and experiences. The poet extremely suggests that even God “had gone into hiding/ and sheltered in place” (lines 20-21).

Furthermore, Tammy Melody Gomez's "Easter Sunday Poem" (Quinn, 2020: pp.44-45) portrays the complexities of celebrating holidays during a pandemic. The poem captures the sense of loss, nostalgia, and yearning for normalcy during a time of social distancing and restrictions: “We chatter from a distance/ she at her front door,/ me on St. Augustine lawn” (lines 4-6). The poet's interactions with her mother and the symbol of the “hand-painted cascaron—confetti egg” (line 12) evoke emotions of longing and melancholy. As the pandemic stretches on, John Kowthe's "Sheltering at Home" (Quinn, 2020: pp.75-76) reflects the profound shift in perspective towards life's essentials. The poet contemplates the significance of home, family, and purpose amid the pandemic's chaos. The first stanza introduces a sense of dissatisfaction with home, seeing it as a place to depart from rather than a fulfilling state of being: “home/ Was always a place to depart from/ Or come back to, not a state of being in itself” (lines 1-3). The speaker describes spending most of their time in their room, disconnected from the external world and wrapped up in nostalgia for the ordinary life they had just a short time ago: I’m back on the shelf for the rest of the day” (line 6).

In Dante Micheaux's "Corona," (Quinn, 2020: p.96) the pandemic serves as a metaphor for the turmoil faced by marginalized communities. The poem alludes to the isolation and distancing brought about by the pandemic, with the absence of people on the usually busy street and the conversation with the neighbor from a distance in lines 9 through 12. The mention of “a hospital of tents” (line 8) near the speaker's location emphasizes the gravity of the situation. The poet reflects on the challenges faced during the pandemic, particularly the sense of responsibility and guilt shared by all for the state of the world. The mention of "Recidivist/ behavior" (lines 23-24) hints at humanity's destructive tendencies and how we must face the consequences of our actions.

Jay Parini's "Moonwalk in Vermont" (Quinn, 2020: pp.119-120) depicts a solitary experience during the pandemic, exploring feelings of isolation and alienation: “I'm walking in a little city/ lonely in a strange blue light” (lines 1-2). Passing by windows filled with goods, the speaker observes the paradox of abundance and emptiness. The excess of material possessions contrasts with a feeling of spiritual emptiness (lines 5-6). The mannequins in the shop windows become symbols of an unchanging and



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



disconnected world (lines 7-9). Despite the changes around them, they remain frozen in their plastic reality. The glove shop's beckoning fingers tempt the speaker, but the poet hides her face, perhaps reluctant to engage with consumerism or the superficialities of the modern world. At the diner, the "ghost-heads" (lines 12-15) of customers silently scrape their plates, representing the dehumanization and isolation prevalent in modern urban life.

As we traverse the diverse landscapes of these poems, this collection offers a rich and multi-layered exploration of the human psyche. The complexities of emotions, resilience, and the search for meaning during moments of profound introspection come alive in these verses. Through the lens of poetic expression, readers are invited to confront their own psychological depths and grapple with the intricacies of the human condition.

4. Social Commentary and Critique

Social commentary in poetry is crucial as it brings attention to societal issues and generates awareness. Poets tackle injustices and inequalities, fostering empathy among readers. Their work initiates dialogues on complex topics. Advocacy and activism are encouraged, motivating readers to create positive change. Poets challenge norms and offer new perspectives, prompting the reevaluation of societal values. Socially conscious poetry acts as a historical record, capturing the emotions and experiences of a specific era. It celebrates resilience and hope, empowering marginalized communities. By inspiring change, poetry motivates individuals to think critically and contribute to a more equitable society.

In the poems "After the Apocalypse" (Quinn, 2020: pp.27-30) by Ama Codjoe and "Corona Diary" by Cornelius Eady, (Quinn, 2020: p.37) the theme of inequality and injustice is explored. Ama Codjoe's poem sheds light on the historical and ongoing racial inequalities in America through references to the "Colored Only waiting room" (line 24) and the transformation "from black-and-white to Technicolor" (line 25). This imagery highlights systemic racism and its enduring impact. On the other hand, Cornelius Eady's "Corona Diary" critiques the disparities in society by drawing attention to the differential impact of the pandemic on various socioeconomic groups: "Those of us who are lucky enough" (line 9). The poem questions the effectiveness of measures taken to protect vulnerable communities, thereby exposing the systemic injustices that contribute to these disparities. Together, these poems offer profound insights into the complexities of societal inequalities and injustices that persist even during times of crisis.





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



In the poems "May Day" by Nicholas Christopher (Quinn, 2020: p.26) and "Moonwalk in Vermont" by Jay Parini, the theme of power and privilege is poignantly addressed. Nicholas Christopher's "May Day" presents a sharp critique of societal power structures. Through the stark juxtaposition of the "demented song of a woman/ on the street" (lines 1-2) and the indifference displayed by those in positions of power in the second and third stanzas, the poem highlights the invisibility of those who suffer and the apathy exhibited by those in authority. This contrast serves as a poignant commentary on the imbalances of power within society and the lack of concern for marginalized voices.

In a similar vein, Jay Parini's "Moonwalk in Vermont" (Quinn, 2020: pp.119-120) offers a compelling critique of societal detachment and disconnect. The poem reflects on the dearth of genuine communication and authentic human interactions among people, painting a portrait of a world where individuals are alienated and emotionally distant from one another.

I see a woman in a pale-green mask
beside a window. When I wave,
she turns away: I must have frightened her-
a man out walking on the moon. (lines 28-31)

This depiction serves as a thought-provoking commentary on the consequences of a society that perpetuates detachment and neglects the importance of meaningful human connections.

In other poems, the concept of collective responsibility acts as a driving force behind the verses encouraging readers to reflect on the importance of unity, empathy, and support in creating a stronger and more compassionate society. They remind us that our actions, as individuals and as a community, can profoundly impact the well-being of others, making it imperative to uphold a sense of shared responsibility for the betterment of all.

In Deborah Garrison's poem "Leaving Evanston," (Quinn, 2020: pp.41-43) the theme of collective responsibility takes center stage as it contemplates the prevailing disconnection and individualism in society. The poem serves as a social commentary by reflecting on the universal experiences and anxieties faced by young adults transitioning from college life to the real world. Through the speaker's contemplations, the poem delves into themes of love, academic pressure, friendship, and the uncertainties of post-graduation life.

She left the bed made



Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



Though it rarely was,
it was where she studied,
Talked to home, and where she'd
Loved a couple of boys. (lines 1-5)

It addresses the challenges of finding one's place in society, symbolized by the theater majors moving to new cities: "They were laughing in the rehearsal room/ And then crying" (lines 52-53). The poem also touches on grief and generational experiences, emphasizing the shared human emotions across time. Similarly, in Rachel Eliza Griffiths' poem "Flowers for Tanisha," (Quinn, 2020: pp.49-50) a powerful call for collective action and unity emerges. The poem emphasizes the significance of community, especially in times of crisis, and advocates for recognizing the shared humanity that binds us all: "New York,/ I want to save you. We, who smile in block gardens/ of memory where life shines like water on green vines" (lines 37-39). Through the celebration of collective resilience, the poem inspires readers to work together in solidarity, fostering a sense of responsibility towards each other's well-being.

Other poems serve as vehicles for social and environmental awareness, urging readers to contemplate the broader context of the pandemic and the need for a more responsible and equitable society. In Linda Gregerson's poem "If the Cure for AIDS," (Quinn, 2020: p.48) the focus shifts to the environmental impact of the pandemic. Beyond the immediate health crisis, the poem prompts readers to consider the broader societal implications. By raising questions about global health ("a glass of clean water"- line 2), social responsibility (criticizing "protecting the owners from lawsuits"- line 5), and the interconnectedness of human actions and the environment ("milk dumped into the culvert", animals "buried alive", and "price of/chicken"- lines 9, 12, 17-18), the poem invites reflection on the far-reaching consequences of our choices and behaviors.

On the other hand, some examples further demonstrate the poems' engagement in social critique, encompassing a wide range of issues such as inequality, power dynamics, collective responsibility, environmental concerns, government response, and societal values. Each poem offers unique perspectives and insights that prompt readers to critically examine the world around them and to reflect on their own roles and responsibilities in contributing to a more equitable and compassionate society. Through the power of poetic expression, these poems serve as catalysts for introspection and dialogue about the complexities of human existence and the dynamics of the world we inhabit. Brenda





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



Shaughnessy's poem "Spillover" (Quinn, 2020: pp.139-140) offers another profound social commentary on systemic issues and societal structures. It directs its critique towards the unequal distribution of resources, shedding light on the disparities that exist within society. Through its powerful message, the poem advocates for transformative change, stressing the importance of collective action and awareness in addressing these pressing issues: "Big fish, small ponder./ [. . .] I had what it took but it took what I had" (lines 21, 23).

In John Freeman's poem "Cards," (Quinn, 2020: p.38) the focus shifts to the theme of isolation and the influence of technology on human connection. Despite the digital interconnectedness of the modern world, the poem suggests that a sense of disconnection and loneliness can still prevail. The poet observes a couple playing cards at their dinner table from across the street. The poet invites someone else to witness the scene with him, and they both marvel at the couple's joy and laughter during their game, ("I can see her smile, or maybe imagine/it"- lines 7-8) highlighting the simple yet intimate moments of connection and happiness that can be found in everyday life. By highlighting this aspect, the poem indirectly questions the role of leadership in addressing societal challenges related to human interaction and emotional well-being. Moreover, Nathalie Handal's poem "Voyages" (Quinn, 2020: pp.53-54) delves into a critique of societal norms and expectations. It encourages individuals to liberate themselves from the pressures imposed by society and embrace their authentic selves: "be certain of your direction,/ your heart knows the road" (lines 11-12). In doing so, the poem reflects on the impact of leadership and cultural norms on the freedom and individuality of people.

5. Literary Significance and Legacy:

The pandemic poems have a profound literary significance that stems from their ability to capture the collective consciousness during a time of global crisis. These poems serve as a testament to the shared experiences and emotions of people worldwide, creating a sense of unity and empathy among readers. Through innovative and experimental forms, poets have pushed the boundaries of traditional poetic structures, conveying the fragmented and chaotic nature of the pandemic experience. By exploring themes such as isolation, grief, uncertainty, and resilience, the poems offer unique responses to unprecedented circumstances, providing nuanced perspectives on the human condition.

Moreover, the pandemic poems hold historical value as they document the thoughts, struggles, and resilience of individuals during this transformative period. They become historical artifacts that offer valuable

Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic



insights into the personal, social, and cultural impacts of the global crisis, serving as primary sources for future generations. These poems offer solace and catharsis to those who have experienced hardship, loss, or isolation during the pandemic, validating their emotions and fostering a sense of solidarity. The emotional resonance of these poems has the potential to endure long after the pandemic subsides, continuing to provide comfort and understanding. Beyond their immediate impact, the pandemic poems may leave a lasting legacy. They can inspire future generations of poets and artists, demonstrating the power of poetry to confront complex emotions and societal issues. These creative responses to the pandemic can spark further exploration of similar themes in literature, encouraging new generations of writers to engage with the legacy of the pandemic poems and contribute to the ongoing artistic discourse. The poems' ability to capture a specific moment in time, representing a unique intersection of personal, societal, and global experiences, ensures that they will preserve the essence of this historic period.

Consequently, the pandemic poems hold literary significance through their reflection of collective consciousness, experimentation with form and style, and profound responses to unprecedented circumstances. Their legacy lies in their role as historical documentation, sources of healing and catharsis, and inspiration for future artistic endeavors. By shaping our understanding of the pandemic experience and contributing to the rich tapestry of literature, these poems become a timeless and invaluable contribution to the artistic world.

6. Conclusion

The investigation of pandemic poetry unveils the profound ramifications of the global crisis on artistic manifestations and the enduring fortitude of human creativity. By scrutinizing a diverse range of poetic compositions, there has been a profound efficacy of language in encapsulating the intricate nuances of emotions, experiences, and adversities engendered by the pandemic. Poets have assumed the roles of observers, chroniclers, and solace-bearers, harnessing their literary skills to unveil the profound depths of human anguish, resilience, and aspirations.

The poetic responses to the global pandemic have showcased the unique ability of poetry to provide solace, connection, and a sense of shared humanity during times of isolation and uncertainty. The poems have served as a testament to the human spirit, offering comfort, catharsis, and a means of collective healing. By giving voice to the experiences of individuals and communities, pandemic poetry has fostered empathy and





Ink in Isolation: Delving into the Poetic Responses to the Global Pandemic

understanding, bridging the gaps between us and reminding us of our shared struggles and aspirations.

Moreover, the literary significance and legacy of pandemic poetry extend beyond the immediate crisis. These poems will serve as historical documents, capturing the essence of this extraordinary period in human history. As one reflects on the poetic responses to the global pandemic, one is reminded of the enduring value of art and its ability to illuminate the human condition. This collection has become a symbol of our collective experience, and the poets who have responded to the pandemic have demonstrated the power of words to create meaning, forge connections, and offer hope in the face of uncertainty. The legacy of pandemic poetry will continue to resonate, reminding us of our capacity for resilience, compassion, and creativity in the face of unprecedented challenges.

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