

“Plagues and Pens: Writers Examine Infectious Diseases”

(*Bellevue Literary Review* Vol. 5, No. 2)

A Study Guide

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INTRODUCTION:

From Boccaccio’s *Decameron* to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, authors have long used epidemics of disease as a locus for exploring relationships between body and self, individual and collective. Plague, smallpox, syphilis, cholera, influenza, tuberculosis, malaria, HIV/AIDS and other infectious illnesses have irrevocably altered the course of human history. Epidemic forces us to reexamine our conceptions of disease and wellness, as well as the way in which we, as a society, structure our lives.

With the “Plagues and Pens” issue, the *Bellevue Literary Review* set out to highlight stories of those who have been impacted by infectious diseases but also to explore fundamental questions raised by illnesses that are communicable. How do infectious diseases affect society differently than other types of diseases? What is the significance of the inextricable social connections that infectious diseases capitalize upon? What is the role of human control and volition in the spread of these diseases?

These stories, essays, and poems from the *Bellevue Literary Review* provide a way to discuss and dissect the effects of infectious disease on patients, caregivers, and society at large. This guide also serves as a way for the reader to further examine the implications of style, voice, and content in creative writing. The study guide is useful for teachers of literature, ethics, medical/nursing students, social workers, as well as for health care professionals, adult continuing education courses, and general reading groups that want to inform and teach about infectious diseases from a literary viewpoint. The study guide is free, and is available online at www.BLReview.org

We welcome your questions and comments. Please contact us at info@BLReview.org

“The Road to Carville” by Pat Tompkins (Fiction, page 8)

1. Why is Gar conflicted about driving Eldonna to Carville?
2. What defines a patient? Is Eldonna sick?
3. How is Gar’s ambivalence displayed by the author?
4. How has Gar’s war experience influenced his feelings about Eldonna and the other patients he drives to Carville?
5. How are animals used in this story?
6. What do you think about the ethics of Gar’s decision?
7. Is this a story about Gar or about Eldonna? Does anyone change or grow? Who? How so?

Animal and Human Relationships

Authority

Beauty

Containment

Definitions of Sickness and Health

Disfigurement

Dreams

Empathy

Escape

Truth

Unspoken Relationships

Youth/ Age

“Mary Sees Her Daughter” by Eve Rifkah (Poetry, page 17)

1. How does the language in the poem help the reader imagine what is happening to Mary?
2. Do you as a reader believe that Mary is sick? Why or why not?
3. How does the context given at the end change the way you view the occurrences in the poem?
4. Does the author use repetition in the poem? If so, how does the repetition strengthen the themes presented in the poem?
5. What word choice is used in the poem to give the impression of sadness and distress? Why do you think she chose these specific words?
6. What sensory images are implemented in the poem? Taste? Sight? Smell? Sound? Are they effective?

Distress

Emotionality

Lack of Control

Mother/ Daughter Relationship

Reality versus Insanity

Separation

Times of Hardship

“The Great Imitator” by Leslie Patterson (Fiction, page 18)

1. How does the incorporation of French words such as *parain*, and *le beau monde* give the story more context for the reader? Does the use of the language make the story more realistic to the reader or more confusing to the reader?
2. Describe the relationship between *parain* and his supposed godson. Which passages support your description?
3. How are the title given to the disease and the title of the story incorporated throughout? How is the disease itself described by the protagonist?
4. What is the importance of *parain*’s artistry in the story and to the character of *parain*?

5. What does this passage signify? “I heard him say that no image, heroic or erotic, could ever measure up to the image of pain. ‘Pain. That’s the core of humanity. That is the poem,’ he rhapsodized. I doubted him then.”
6. How is *parain*’s physical appearance described? Why do you think the author chose to describe him as such?
7. Why does the protagonist imitate his supposed father? How does this relate to a larger theme in the story?

Familial relationships
Lying
Condescension

Treatments
Societal Restrictions
Translations

“Shobo” by Dannie Abse (Poetry, page 27)

1. Who are the characters in this poem? Where are they from? Where is the action taking place?
2. What is the patient’s concept of health, sickness, and the cause of his illness? What is the doctor’s concept of these?
3. What does the poet mean by “malignant eidolon?”
4. Describe the structure and rhythm of the poem.
5. Where and how does the poem work with notions of foreignness and the familiar? Things to consider could be the duality of title, the juxtaposition of medical language with references to the patient’s culture and religion, and the apparent opposition between reason/science/medicine with irrationality/fear/religion/superstition. Is this truly the way the divide falls with respect to the oppositions in the poem? Is religion equated with superstition, fear, irrationality? Does science and medicine provide clarity and knowledge?
6. How does the speaker view his patient and his patient’s culture and religion?
 - Does he take a critical stance, denigrating the patient as superstitious and irrational?
 - Notice the shift in the third stanza. (Consider the doctor’s question of reason and his own rationality.) What form does this shift take and what is its effect?
 - How does this shift effect of the preconceptions the doctor brings to his encounter with his patient, as well as those the reader might bring to this poem?
7. How does the doctor view himself through an imaginative projection into his patient’s perspective? Does this reflection on himself change him?
8. What is the relationship between the doctor and patient? Are the two at an impasse?
9. Is the doctor able to understand and communicate with his patient? Consider the role of translation in this poem. If translation and communication are frustrated, how does that make the speaker feel with regard to himself, his profession, his patient?

(Self) Alienation
Communication/ Connection
Cultural Divide b/w Doctor
and Patient

Diagnosing
Disconnection
Doctor/ Patient Relationship
Isolation

Mystery/ Clarity
Powerlessness
Religion and Science
Translators/ Translation

“Afternoon Heat” by Vishwas R. Gaitonde (Fiction, page 28)

1. How does the setting of the story, India, lend verisimilitude and context for the reader?
2. What senses are used to describe the surroundings of the city? Are they effective in doing so? Why or why not?
3. What can you tell about the cultures in India from the story? How does this affect medical practice/medical assistance?
4. Is the way that syphilis and AIDS are presented in the story different from what you have read before? How?
5. Describe Rangan’s character.
6. What is the view of syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases of the characters in the story/in India? How is that similar or different from the current views regarding STDs?
7. Describe the differences between the types of patients that the doctor treats at the two clinics.
8. How does weather play a part in the story?

Culture

Urbanization

Vulnerability

Forbidden love

Consequences

Class Division

Disease

Blame

Guilt

Misdiagnosis

Cause/ effect

“Silence = Death” by Rafael Campo (Poetry, page 36)

1. Do you remember seeing this slogan, Silence=Death? What did it mean? Why was this slogan used? Is it relevant now?
2. Investigate the word “count,” including its variations. List the number of times it is used. Take a look at who counts.
3. Similarly, examine the usage of words about speaking and language, and also words about silence.
4. “...one left me this stupid T-shirt when he died,” the patient says. The poet himself wonders, at the poem’s beginning, why the t-shirt still threatens him. Why does it?

Control/Loss of

Coping

Death

Family

Fear

Friends

Grief

Helplessness/Powerlessness

Loss

Medication

Protest

Silence

“Sick Day” by Rafael Campo (Poetry, page 37)

1. What do you think is meant to be initially established by the title of the poem?
2. How are religious connotations used throughout the poem?
3. How is metaphor used? Where are the metaphors in the poem?
4. “We all get sick and die, we all/remember something as it happened once.” What is the significance of these lines?
5. How is imagery used by the author? What images are portrayed?

6. What do you think is meant by, “feed a fever, starve a cold”?

Religion
Inevitability
Memory
Salvation
Lack of Control

Sensory observations
Protection
Sickness
Fear

“Prisoner” by John Stone (Poetry, page 48)

1. What is the prison? Who is the prisoner?
2. Does the poet feel that this research is morally correct?
3. What metaphors does the poet use for the illness?
4. How does the opening quotation from Auden relate to the rest of the poem? What or whom does this poem praise?
5. Discuss the historical references, such as allusions to the Vietnam War.
6. How does the speaker define heroism in the poem? What are the examples of heroism he provides? How do they relate to and reflect upon each other?
7. How is malaria represented in the poem? What kinds of metaphors does the speaker use to describe it?
8. Geographical locations mentioned in the poem include Atlanta, Africa, and Vietnam. How are these locations positioned in relation to one another? Does the poem indicate a sense of a global community, or a global threat?

<i>Anger</i>	<i>Resentment</i>
<i>Containment/Escape</i>	<i>Sacrifice</i>
<i>Doctor/Patient Relationship</i>	<i>Sickness</i>
<i>Guilt</i>	<i>Veterans</i>
<i>Humor</i>	<i>Vulnerable Populations</i>
<i>Research</i>	<i>War</i>

“The Hangover” by Glenn Vanstrum (Fiction, page 38)

1. What does Vanstrum mean by “alien society,” and how is this theme presented throughout the rest of the story?
2. How does Africa challenge Malcom’s perceptions of Africa (more specifically, Kenya), both positively and negatively?
3. How is the importance of culture immersion stressed in this story? Or do you disagree that culture immersion is important at all? Explain.
4. Describe the dynamic of the Hartford family. Why is this certain dynamic important to the story?
5. Why does Hartford say he is uncomfortable with infectious diseases? Do you agree with his reasoning? Why or why not?
6. Why, after all of the horrible instances Hartford has seen, does the occurrence in the tent affect him more than ever before? How does Hartford react to the procedure that takes place?

7. What does it mean when Connery says “rather like spitting in the ocean to raise the tide”?
8. How does the name “the Dark Continent” fit into the story line? How does it fit in with the current perceptions/knowledge of Africa as a country?

<i>Disconnect</i>	<i>Lack of Education</i>
<i>Escape</i>	<i>Frustration</i>
<i>Danger in the unknown</i>	<i>Destitute</i>
<i>Wildlife</i>	<i>Lifestyle differences</i>
<i>Family</i>	<i>Change</i>
<i>Friendship</i>	

“The Only Fat Man in Lascahobas” by Evan Lyon (Nonfiction, page 56)

1. What is your first impression of Georges? Why?
2. What does physical appearance seem to indicate in a place such as Haiti? Is this true in other countries as well?
3. “They could have been 20 years old, or they might have been hung for a service yesterday.” Explain the significance and implications of this quotation and why it is an important description of the funeral home.
4. What part does culture/religion play in Haitian deaths and funeral ceremonies?

<i>Class differences</i>	<i>Family</i>
<i>Death</i>	<i>Voodoo</i>
<i>Money</i>	<i>Mourning</i>
<i>Poverty</i>	

“The Porch” by Katherine Soniat (Poetry, page 55)

1. Why do you think the author included the quotation before the poem? How does it relate to the poem itself?
2. “Whole systems of belief blew in, /then departed, /notions the mind stirred up to serve till the end.” What is meant by these lines?
3. What imagery is used to describe the setting and the mood of the poem?
4. What themes are presented by the author of the poem? Explain.
5. How is the poem organized? Is this structure effective for this poem? Why or why not?
6. How does the sense of cold come across in this poem?

<i>Pain</i>	<i>Hopelessness</i>
<i>Waiting</i>	<i>Forgotten</i>
<i>Cold</i>	<i>Despair</i>

“Quarantine” by Matthew Davis (Nonfiction, page 56)

1. What are other examples of plagues that you can think of from history? Are there any as modern as this?

2. How does Mongolian culture and ritual relate to the plague? What differences does the author point out in Mongolian culture throughout the story?
3. Davis says: “All of my conceptions of plague had come from literature or movies.” Can you relate to this statement? Where else have you heard about or read about plagues?
4. What signs of quarantine begin to arise as the story progresses? How do you think you would act in the situation of quarantine?
5. How is this description of quarantine different or similar to others you have heard? Why?
6. How does the main character handle the quarantine compared to the other people in the story, namely native Mongolians?

Agitation

Culture

Environment

Fear

Plague

Rumor

Trapped

“In the British Library Repository” by Katie Chaple (Poetry, page 64)

1. How is the setting described? Why is this description important?
2. Which senses are used in this poem? How are they described?
3. Why is reading the letters less tempting than smelling them in this case?
4. What imagery does the poem depict? What words are key parts of this depiction?
5. What is the tone of the poem? Which words indicate this tone? Why?

Curiosity

History

Learning

Sight

Smell

Touch

“Plague Year” by William Orem (Poetry, page 65)

1. There is a large amount of anthropomorphism used in this poem. Where is it used? How does it help describe what is happening in the poem?
2. What is the tone of the poem? Which words indicate this tone?
3. Describe the structure of the poem. How does the splitting up of sentences within the poem change the way the poem is seen and read?
4. From what point of view is this poem written? How does the language used indicate point of view?
5. What descriptive language is used throughout the poem? What images are created from it?
6. What similes/metaphors are used in the poem? What do they describe?
7. What does the author indicate about the beliefs of the people regarding the plague? Do they think it is something that will pass, or does he indicate otherwise?

Anticipation

Bodies

Cold

Dark

Death

Quiet

Sickness

Stories

“The Gift of the Spanish Lady” by Marcia Calhoun Forecki (Fiction, page 66)

1. In a town such as Eulalia, how does the sickness affect people, compared to those in a city, such as Kansas City?
2. What imagery/description is used to describe the setting (the house, Alice’s room, Mr. Sommer’s study)? Give specific examples
3. What is implied by the name “The Spanish Lady”? How does this relate historically to the time of the flu?
4. How would you describe the different characters depicted in the story? What about the relationship between Betsy and Alice? And Betsy and Doctor Howe? Are these amicable relationships, or not?
5. What is the significance of this passage: “Her servant days had burned up with the fever; she had risen to become a teacher.”?
6. What are some of the implications made about the abilities of women at the time? Abilities of women of color?
7. How does weather play a role throughout the story? Give examples.

Class separation
Education
Hopelessness
Independence

Racial differences
Refuge
Security
Sudden

“The Sky Gone White” by Priscilla Atkins (Poetry, page 77)

1. What do you think is meant to be initially established by the title of the poem, “The Sky Gone White”?
2. How does the poet compare the people trying to “erase themselves” to what her mother does to her because of her brother’s asthma? Why is this important?
3. Describe the structure of the poem.
4. How is color used throughout the poem? What does it help to describe?
5. What does the poet mean by “I pushed my way/through the backdoor/to find the sky itself/gone white”?

Disappear
Fear
Past

Protection
Reflection
Spreading

“Measles: 1949” by Susan Moger (Poetry, page 78)

1. What is initially striking about the structure of the story? How is it different from most of the prose you have read? Why is it organized this way?
2. Which perspective is the story being told from? How can you tell?
3. What is the setting of the story?
4. How is imagery used in this story?
5. What indicates to the main character that her mother has died? Why do you think this is how she knows?

6. There is no dialogue in the story. How does this affect structure? How does it change the way the story is told?
7. What descriptions are given of the mother? What does this tell you about her?
8. How is the mom's role as a "nurse" important to the girl? How is it ironic that she calls her mother a nurse?
9. The illness of the mother is never named. What language indicates what she has had to go to the hospital for? Did the author need to name the disease, or does the language tell you on its own?
10. How do the two illnesses in the story juxtapose one another? Why do you think this contrast is used?

<i>Care</i>	<i>Hospital</i>
<i>Comparisons</i>	<i>Loss</i>
<i>Compassion</i>	<i>Mother/Daughter</i>
<i>Death</i>	<i>Naivety</i>
<i>Family</i>	<i>Youth</i>

“Serratia Marcescens” by Peter Sordillo (Poetry, page 80)

1. What does the title initially tell you about the poem? Does it make you more curious to know what the poem is about?
2. How does the poet blend reality and fantasy? Which words in the poem indicate this?
3. How is color used in the poem? Pay attention to how many times the word “red” is used.
4. Where are simile/metaphor used? What do they offer to the poem in terms of imagery?
5. How does the context at the end of the poem change how the subject came across to you? Why?
6. What perspective is this story told from? Is it effective? Why or why not?
7. How does the word choice in the poem set the tone?
8. What is the setting? How is it described?

Blood
City
Destruction
Disease
Dying
Germ
Unknowing