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Plagues and Pandemics: When Will the Plots Change?

From ancient times plagues have appeared as initiating events in works of canonical Western literatures demonstrating anger of the gods at certain human offenses or evil actions, for which acceptable atonement must be made to end the deaths and devastation. This pattern appears from Homer's epic *The Iliad* into the twentieth century, perhaps most notably in Camus's *The Plague*, and even, some might argue, through the AIDS era. In these literary works, plagues afflict specific peoples or places, efforts are usually made to seek and punish the evil doer(s) or find a scapegoat who can be punished or make acceptable atonement, while civic measures are implemented to try to contain the disease, usually to a specific location or population, leaving others relatively safe. Characters' most important ethical decision is whether to stay and help fight the disease or try to escape and save themselves. We argue that worldwide pandemics, such as the so-called Spanish flu of 1918 and the currently raging coronavirus and its variants, should bring changes to the older plot patterns because a single person or community may not be identifiable either to blame or atone for a particular offense, pandemics by definition cannot be isolated or contained, and new variants may emerge as quickly as new treatments and vaccines become available. These new pandemic plots should acknowledge effects the Anthropocene era has had on the health of the planet on which such diseases develop. In our presentation, we will discuss features that a literary work about the coronavirus might have if it were to introduce plot differences between canonical works of plague literature and potentially canonical works of pandemic literature. We acknowledge that such literary works could appear first in non-Western literatures, and we call on our international colleagues to alert us if so. (297 words)