

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Plague Metaphor in *Arrowsmith*

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Abstract: In Sinclair Lewis' novel *Arrowsmith*, through its rich disease narrative, an image of an upright doctor who encounters repeated setbacks in social practice is created. The novel satirizes the materialism of society and the abuse of power by government officials in the early 20th century. Unlike the mere description of disease symptoms from a medical perspective, the author's depiction of disease in the novel carries profound metaphorical connotations. Therefore, based on Susan Sontag's theory of disease as metaphor, this paper focuses on the plague in the novel. By analyzing the three metaphors embodied in the plague, it reveals the realistic problems in the colonial society, such as official corruption, the distortion of people's values and moral degradation. In the novel, Lewis criticizes the colonial society by virtue of the disease narrative, demonstrating the close connection between disease and society.

Keywords: *Arrowsmith*, plague, disease metaphor

1 Introduction

In 1925, Sinclair Lewis published his novel *Arrowsmith*. Since its release, the book has garnered immense public acclaim and praise. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1926, establishing itself as a significant work in modern American literature. Lewis' depiction of the plague in the novel presents the suffering and despair of the public amid the epidemic of the time, exposing social issues such as government corruption and incompetence, racial discrimination, and weak public health awareness. "In literary works, as the most severe collective disease or disaster, plague possesses characteristics including concealment, complexity, infectivity, and far-reaching impact. Therefore, writers often use metaphors to convey the physical and mental devastation inflicted by plague on humanity and its social repercussions. (Tang, 2024, pp. 103-104)". Currently, domestic and foreign research on *Arrowsmith* mainly focuses on themes such as colonial medicine and medical humanities: Gerald James Fitz analyzes the relationship between scientific experiments, medical ethics, and racial discrimination in the novel from a medical humanities perspective, revealing the unconscious tendency in the narrative to legitimize American colonial medicine (Fitz, 2021, p. 249); Jiang Tianping interprets the essence of Western medicine, colonial medicine, and tropical medicine in *Arrowsmith* based on postcolonial theory, pointing out the imperial writer consciousness unconsciously reflected in the author's creation (Jiang, 2014, p. 34); Wan Ling focuses on the theme of medical humanities, exploring the conflict between scientific idealism and utilitarianism through an analysis of the doctor images in the novel (Wan, 2016, p. 83). However, after synthesizing existing domestic and foreign research findings, it is found that no scholar has explored the metaphorical connotations of the plague in *Arrowsmith* from the perspective of illness as metaphor. Therefore, this paper applies Susan Sontag's theory of illness as metaphor to conduct an in-depth analysis of the plague, aiming to reveal its political, cultural, and moral metaphors. The research finds that the author's depiction of the plague is not only a presentation of the disease disaster but also a metaphor for official corruption, cultural drawbacks, and moral degradation under colonial rule: corrupt officials concealed the epidemic in its early stages, shirked responsibilities, and disregarded people's lives when the disease erupted, which constitutes the political metaphor of the plague; commercialism and racial discrimination intensified amid the epidemic, exposing the distortion of social values and forming the cultural metaphor of the plague; under colonial rule, some people suffered from spiritual decadence and self-degradation, and human flaws became more prominent after the epidemic broke out, constituting its moral metaphor.

2 The Political Metaphor of British Colonizers' Corruption

“When discussing illness, the body is an unavoidable objective existence, and physical experiences often point to physiological or psychological diseases. In the political sphere, the body is the object or tool of power operation. From this perspective, illness and politics have a natural metaphorical correspondence. (Jiang, 2014, p. 68)”. Therefore, the metaphor of illness compares a sound society to a healthy body, and the city-state political system to an organic living being. In the political structure, government officials are like the human brain, assuming the role of order maintainers; while the entire society is like the human body, acting as order followers. Only when the government fully exerts its functions of managing and coordinating society can the society develop stably; on the contrary, government corruption is like a virus invasion, triggering social disorder.

In the novel, St. Hubert Island is a British colony. There is a bar named the Ice Palace on the island, which is a gathering place for white rulers. They are dispirited due to homesickness: “These people who crave comfort will never go back to their hometown. But they always make new promises during cocktail hour at the Ice Palace, until they die, and other exiles attend their funerals, whispering to each other that they are going back home. (Lewis, 1987, p. 423)”. The British here are portrayed as drunkards, reflecting the degeneration and decadence of British colonizers. Other officials, meanwhile, are politically corrupt, engaging in open and secret struggles for personal gain. Sir Philham, the local governor, is selfish and causes the split of the legislature to bring down his political opponents, undermining the foundation of social governance; while Inchcape, the Director of Health, neglects his duties. When the Kelletts propose dismissing the rat-catchers at the parliamentary meeting, although some members oppose it on the grounds that rats may spread diseases, Inchcape argues that “if those red-legged rascals like the Kelletts are eager to die of plague and rat-bite fever, why should decent people object? (Lewis, 1987, p. 419)”. This reflects his disregard for the lives of local people. In fact, rat infestation on St. Hubert is rampant, not only destroying crops but also posing potential risks of disease transmission. As the Director of Health, Inchcape should have comprehensively considered the local actual situation and the health and safety of the people, and treated this proposal cautiously. However, he approved the passage of the bill, an act that indirectly laid the groundwork for the outbreak of the plague. “In the history of human resistance against plague, positive epidemic prevention measures can help people finally get rid of the shadow of violence and despotism, and curb the further penetration of disease metaphors in human society.” (Guo, 2021, p. 116). Yet the incompetence of British colonizers in the face of the plague was fully exposed. In the early stages of the plague, officials concealed the epidemic from the people, which provided a breeding ground for the full-scale outbreak of the disease, leading to the rampant spread of the plague and numerous deaths. After the disease fully erupted, the group of officials was cowardly and incompetent, not only losing their sanity and the ability to respond to the epidemic but also concealing the situation of the plague from the outside world and refusing external assistance. Their only quarantine measure was to convert school buildings into isolation hospitals, which simply targeted infected patients rather than solving the disease problem at its root, exposing the flaws of the political system in the public health system.

Susan Sontag pointed out: “Illness is often used as a metaphor to vividly express accusations against social corruption or injustice. (Sontag, 2003, p. 65)”. On St. Hubert, the political corruption of officials not only reflects social disorder but also further leads to the collapse of social order. Before the outbreak of the plague, the entire society operated in accordance with the rules formulated by British colonizers, but the emergence of the plague exposed the existing social problems, plunging the entire society into a state of disorder. Finally, a rescue team from New York took over their power and performed management duties. As Sontag noted: “Illness comes from imbalance. Treatment is aimed at restoring the right balance, or to reestablish the proper hierarchy in political terms. (Sontag, 2003, p. 65)”. It can be seen that the transition from the social order dominated by British colonizers to the intervention of an external rescue team is not only a form of medical assistance but also a reconstruction of the original social order. This transformation indicates that the original social order could no longer be maintained under the impact of the epidemic, and the political corruption of British colonial rule not only created conditions for the spread of the disease but also led to the collapse of social order when the crisis came.

3 The Cultural Metaphor of Social Alienation

In literary works, driven by anxiety about the current culture, writers often metaphorize culture as a physical illness that a country needs to cure. Therefore, illness is no longer merely regarded as a painful experience of individual life, but is often used as a rhetorical device or metaphor, carrying cultural connotations (Jiang, 2007, p. 81). In the novel, the plague, as a cultural metaphor, reflects the alienation dilemma of the relationships between humans and objects, as well as between humans themselves, while revealing the social problems of commercialism and racial discrimination behind this alienation. This alienation stems from the distortion of the entire social values: people's excessive pursuit of material and economic interests leads to the alienation of the relationship between humans and objects; at the same time, racial discrimination prejudices cause estrangement between people, forming the alienation of interpersonal relationships.

Values are essentially a product of culture, and different cultures shape different value systems. On St. Hubert Island, alienated values have led to the prevalence of materialism, and this excessive admiration for material things has trapped people in a swamp of interests, neglecting public interests and life and health. In the novel, British colonizers carried out global trade on the island to develop the capitalist economy, and it was precisely because of this that the plague spread to St. Hubert. In order to achieve rapid economic development, the colonizers sacrificed public health and the ecological environment in this process: "The Ford cars, churches, coal yards, mining areas, shops, plantations, etc., on St. Hubert Island are all products of Western civilization, along with densely populated residential areas, shabby shacks, small shops without doors and windows, and a pervasive stench of decay. (Jiang, 2014, p. 65)". This scene is a manifestation of the imbalance between rapid economic development driven by materialism and the ecological environment, showing the severe impact of local economic development on the public health environment and providing conditions for the spread of diseases. Under the influence of materialism, merchants controlled the parliament, leading social development towards a pathological model centered on interests. After the outbreak of the epidemic, the merchants controlling the parliament only valued their immediate economic interests and completely ignored public health and safety. When Inchcape attempted to use sulfur dioxide to fumigate warehouses to eliminate rats, the merchants strongly protested the action, claiming that the fumigation contaminated fabrics and paints, ultimately leading to the suspension of Inchcape's action and thus missing the best opportunity to contain the epidemic. This incident shows that in the social value system at that time, economic benefits dominated health and safety. This value system led to the reversal and alienation of the relationship between humans and objects: materials were no longer tools serving human survival, but instead alienated into interest symbols overriding people's life and health, thereby affecting the sustainable development of society.

In addition, racial discrimination, as a cultural prejudice, was further amplified in the face of the plague, damaging the social structure. "The racism mentioned by Foucault is closely related to his discourse on biopolitics. When discussing biopolitics, Foucault pointed out that biopolitics was originally an act of the government and the state to protect the people's right to life, but ultimately evolved into racist practices. (Dong, 2024, p. 115)". Severe racial discrimination also existed on St. Hubert, exacerbating social contradictions and chaos, which was further amplified in the face of the plague. In the early stages of the epidemic, the only two Black bacteriologists on the island proposed inspecting rats to identify the center of infection. However, their proposal was rejected because Inchcape did not believe in the intelligence and ability of Black people, and thus it could not be put into practice. This racial prejudice not only missed the opportunity for scientific prevention and control of the epidemic but also exposed the negative impact of social contradictions in responding to crises. The Black doctor Marchand in the novel was allowed to attend the Health Committee meeting not because he was the smartest person on the island, but because he represented the plantation laborers. He even said himself: "In this emergency, they even allow Black doctors to treat white people. (Lewis, 1987, p. 454)". This confirms Foucault's statement that racism distinguishes between biological superiority and inferiority, and divides hierarchies and boundaries between different races (Foucault, 2003, pp. 254-255).

4 The Moral Metaphor of Human Degeneration

Plague writing carries profound moral metaphors, symbolizing people's moral degradation and corruption. "Linking illness to divine punishment is a common phenomenon in Western discourse

practice. By tracing its origins, Sontag found that ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and subsequent eras all regarded illness as God's punishment for human moral degradation. (Cha & Tang, 2009, p. 81)". Therefore, this belief establishes a close connection between illness and morality. In literary works, illness is often endowed with moral metaphorical functions. For example, in the first book of the Iliad, Apollo afflicted the Achaeans with plague to punish Agamemnon for abducting Chryseis' daughter; in Oedipus Rex, plague swept Thebes due to the crimes committed by the king of Thebes (Zhang, 2020, p. 39). In the novel, the outbreak of the plague similarly bears a profound moral metaphor. Before the plague erupted, there were various phenomena of moral corruption on the island: "After going mad, Marquis Winsbury liked to tinker with clocks and ordered his slaves to burn all the sugarcane; the playboy peasant named Gaston Lobo lived a life of luxury and debauchery. (Lewis, 1987, p. 417)". After the plague broke out, due to the lack of correct understanding of the plague among the local government and villagers, it was difficult to identify its root cause. Thus, some religious believers interpreted the plague from a superstitious perspective, rendering the disease explicitly moralized. When Martin first arrived on the island, the clergyman Ira Hinckley said to him: "I wish you could see the evil deeds of these natives—how they lie, sing obscene songs, and are capable of every vice...The Lord of heaven and earth, in His eternal mercy, has visited this divine punishment upon them because they have profaned the gospel generously bestowed by God. (Lewis, 1987, p. 451)". Based on his observations on the island and the social moral atmosphere, Ira believed that the plague was God's punishment for the natives' sinful acts of profaning the gospel. This reflects that in his perception, morality and illness were closely intertwined, and illness was regarded as Heaven's punishment for the moral degradation of the group. As Sontag stated, "even if the epidemic is not considered a judgment on a group by God, tracing back from the result to the source, it inevitably becomes a judgment on that group, as if it has triggered an irreversible collapse of morality and mores. (Sontag, 2003, p. 38)".

However, the rampant spread of the plague shattered the original social moral order, placing people in moral dilemmas. Consequently, some individuals exposed human flaws when choosing between morality and survival. Firstly, the group of selfish, incompetent officials prioritized self-preservation. In the face of the plague, Inchcape, the Director of Health, fell into a state of frantic helplessness, losing the ability to organize epidemic prevention efforts and even bribing others to flee; other surviving officials hid at home to shirk their responsibilities. Secondly, there were the rescue team members sent to the disaster area. As part of the rescue team, Sondelius traveled to St. Hubert with Martin to treat the plague, but driven by desire for power, he curried favor with the local government and gained supreme authority over epidemic prevention actions. Afterwards, Sondelius acted arbitrarily, wielding his power triumphantly and even violating property protection laws to seize supplies from stores. These actions reveal the greed and degradation of human nature in times of crisis, and moral corruption, much like the plague, is highly contagious, constantly infecting others. Finally, there was the general public eager to survive. When residents learned that Martin had a way to save them but refused to use it, driven by the instinct to survive, they morally criticized and attacked him: "They hurled insults at Martin on the streets, and even children threw stones at him. (Lewis, 1987, p. 469)". This self-centered moral judgment confirms Ross's statement that "their absolute selfishness is a symptom of moral illness, a plague that characteristically and unmistakably exposes, tears apart relationships of love and trust, setting neighbor against neighbor, parent against child, and subject against ruler. (Ross, 1988, p. 440)". At the end of the story: "Whether it was due to phage, rat extermination, or divine providence, the plague subsided... Even without phage, plagues always abate and end eventually. (Lewis, 1987, pp. 485-486)". This statement obscures the key role of scientific epidemic prevention measures in treating the plague; instead, it points to the moral metaphor of the plague, which is that the plague originates from moral corruption, and by punishing those who are morally degraded, it helps people achieve moral reconstruction and purification.

5 The Social Value of Plague Metaphor

In *Arrowsmith*, the author's depiction of the plague holds significant social value. Analyzing the metaphors of the plague not only exposes the underlying social problems but also prompts people to reflect on real society, contributing to its better development.

From a social perspective, although society continues to progress, people's attention to health remains seriously insufficient. This unbalanced relationship between economic development and public health security will give rise to a series of social problems. Throughout the history of

human society, plagues are usually caused by three factors: firstly, the degradation of human nature; secondly, weak public health awareness; thirdly, flaws in the social development model. With the continuous development of social economy, when economic benefits arouse people's endless desires, some individuals indulge in extravagance and dissipation, leading to moral degradation. When a region has never experienced a plague, people naturally perceive diseases as distant, and this complacent mentality results in a lack of public health awareness among the general public. However, this lack of awareness is not merely an individual issue but also related to society's development philosophy. When the government allocates more resources to economic sectors, the development model centered on excessive economic growth increasingly reveals its drawbacks, leading to dereliction of duty in public health management, accompanied by the breakdown of traditional social values and the destruction of the ecological environment. While the accelerated circulation of commodities increases the risk of disease transmission, the construction of social public health systems is neglected. Consequently, society is unable to resist the invasion of diseases when they strike. In this context, compared with the physical suffering caused by diseases, the psychological panic accompanying them has a more profound impact on society, and this panic stems from people's ignorance of diseases and the inadequate public health system.

Therefore, in the process of social development, the idea of focusing solely on economic interests at the expense of health and safety is inherently risky. Conversely, without economic support, it is equally impossible to protect people's health or achieve long-term social stability. Only when the government enhances social governance capacity, faces up to existing problems in governance, balances economic development with public health security, and constructs a sound public health system can society avoid falling into chaos during crises, thereby realizing long-term stability and sustainable development.

6 Conclusion

In the course of human social development, health security has always been crucial to individual survival and the stable development of the entire society. Throughout history, humans have fought against diseases in various ways, and diseases have been endowed with richer connotations in literary works. In *Arrowsmith*, the author describes the plague from its outbreak to its subsidence, depicting social conditions and the behaviors of different characters amid disaster, and endowing the plague with profound metaphorical meanings: political corruption and social alienation are the root causes of the plague, while the spread of the disease further exacerbates social disorder and moral decay, ultimately forming a cycle of disaster. Therefore, analyzing the metaphor of illness in literary works is both a reflection on history and an enlightenment for contemporary society. When a disease strikes a society, concealing or denying it clearly cannot stop its rampant spread; on the contrary, it will bring disaster to society. Only by confronting the metaphors behind the disease and acknowledging existing social problems can we prevent the recurrence of disasters. Thus, in the post-pandemic era, governments need to strengthen the construction of public health systems and emergency management systems and adhere to the principle of open and transparent information in social governance; society should raise public health awareness; and citizens should strengthen their sense of morality and responsibility. Only through the joint efforts of multiple subjects, which include governments, society, and citizens, can we effectively prevent health security risks and promote the healthy development of social order and value systems.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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