A LITERARY EXAMPLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS TO DISASTERS: ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE PLAGUE ON THE PEOPLE OF MILAN AS DESCRIBED IN “THE BETROTHED” BY ALESSANDRO MANZONI

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Foreword
Our example of a memorable psychological reaction to a disaster in the history of literature refers to the famous episode of the novel “The Betrothed” by Alessandro Manzoni, describing, among other things, people who actually lived. We will try to make a psychological analysis of the main characters involved in the plot, trying to point out the differences between a man who lives in peacetime and those who have experienced the plague and will also try to analyze the changes in the mental processes enacted by the particular social and psychological situation caused by a scourge like the plague.

Analysis of the psychological impact of the plague on the people of Milan as described by Alessandro Manzoni in his masterpiece

Now, let us start by describing the reaction of a character, the Cardinal Federico Borromeo who really existed and was described by Manzoni as a saintly man. His attitude to the plague is particularly interesting and reveals his opinion on the plague in two occasions, one referring to the religious procession and the other one to the widespread belief of the existence of “plague spreaders”.

For the procession which included the meeting of almost the entire population of Milan, Borromeo, who was, in reality, a man of an exceptional culture and refined intelligence, realized that the assembling of a crowd of people could cause the spreading of an unknown contagious agent from one person to another (in fact, in the days following the procession there was a rapid increase of the number of infected people).

With regard to the spreaders, Federico Borromeo never expressed a definite opinion on the nature of this phenomenon as he obviously realized that, although it was of a very small size as compared to what was imagined to be an effect of the popular psychosis, it was still possible that some criminals who had experienced the scourge and thus were immunized and when they became “monatti” (corpse carriers), they could have an interest in the epidemic further spreading and may have decided to throw some infected objects from their hearses, thus creating a possible source of infection. The Cardinal took, then, an overall attitude of prudent suspension of judgment not only as regarded the causes of the plague that he obviously ignored, but also suspected that there might have been occurrences favoring the epidemic as the gathering of too many people and the possible intervention of some, though isolated, criminals acting out of mere viciousness.

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A different attitude was taken by another character, Don Abbondio, who, after recovering from the disease, showed to be even pleased by the coming of the plague just because he regarded it as a sort of broom which had swept away all the dirtiness that had piled up and particularly the person for whom he nourished a deep-rooted sense of hatred, that is Don Rodrigo. His repulsion made him express the extreme wish of the coming of a plague epidemic for every generation of people (obviously, provided he could always overcome it), in order to carry out a regular cleaning operation.

After the two clergymen who turn out to be one worthy of the greatest admiration and the other definitely not up to his task, if we consider, above all, his behavior, even apart from the plague, his refusal to join Renzo and Lucia in marriage or his ascent to the castle of the “Unnamed”.

Now, let us go on with the review of the other characters.

An interesting opinion was expressed by a member of the aristocracy of Milan described by Manzoni, Don Ferrante, a keen astrologer, who believed that the plague was due to the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, against which there was absolutely nothing to do; and with this conviction, he died firmly convinced of being the victim of a fatality against which it was absolutely impossible to react.

As to the others who have significant roles in the novel, we find Renzo who contracted the plague and did absolutely nothing (probably aware that there was nothing to be done) to try to heal.

The same experience was made by Lucia, who was in Milan as a guest of Donna Prassede, Don Ferrante’s wife and contracted the disease, but did nothing against it. Anyway, she recovered by placing her faith in Divine Providence and keeping her vow of chastity.

Agnes took refuge in a town where for unknown reasons the plague was less violent; the place was called Pasturo and there Renzo met her some time later.

Also Perpetua died of plague but for her death Don Abbondio, who owed her very much, not even a word of regret.

Also with the other characters Griso: Dr. Azzeccagarbugli, Count Attilio and Uncle Count, the plague was not indulgent.

The Griso, who turned out to be a real traitor, was a man devoid of any emotional faculty. He delivered Don Rodrigo, who had just been struck by the plague, to the “Monatti” after robbing him of everything he could grasp and then, struck by a sudden stroke of the disease, he died before reaching the hospital where Don Rodrigo was lying, still alive. The reaction of the “The Bravo” (the hired thug) to the plague revealed his true personality as a criminal deprived of any sort of human sensibility.

As regards Dr. Azzeccagarbugli, Manzoni referred to him only with a streak of humour (since he was a man who had always lived by his wits, which proved of no use in front of the infection of the plague), just by indicating the cemetery where he was buried. Obviously, he did not have adequate “connections” to escape from the plague infection, though he was a master in escaping the rules of the human law and of all sorts of public provisions.

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2 A noble Milanese which Cardinal Federico asked to give hospitality to Lucia.
3 In the television series of the RAI of 1989 on “The Betrothed”, the same Don Abbondio dedicates a long speech to his housekeeper died have assisted him.
4 The plague, like any sickness, can have different routes and it ranges from fulminant cases such as that of Griso to forms of plague outpatient like that which will Among Fra Cristoforo that may last for weeks, and that in the case of Fra Cristoforo leads him to assist the sick until the last moment.
For Count Attilio there was a funeral oration, very well delivered by Don Rodrigo, just in the very evening when he was struck by the plague.

For Count Uncle, the Author just says that he too was a victim of the plague without any further comment. Evidently his ability to compromise in the field of high politics did not move the plague. But now let's examine the other outstanding characters: Father Christopher, Father Felix, Don Rodrigo and take the opportunity to talk about one of the most impressive episodes of goodness and beauty in the novel which tells the tragic story of the death of Cecilia.

Don Rodrigo, who believed that it was the wine "vernaccia" he had drunk the real cause of the illness that would take him to death with a last dream in which the figure of Fra Cristoforo appeared and later a foul bubonic swelling came up under his armpit and then, finally, he lost consciousness and died without recovering any more. His awareness of the plague lasted only a few hours in which he was still in a conscious state as after the arrival of the "Monatti" and "theft" of the Griso; then, he fell into a state of unconsciousness which lasted until death. It is noteworthy that his last emotional reaction, rather than of hatred for death, was a feeling of resentment and hatred against the Griso.

At this point it is worthwhile mentioning the episode of Cecilia, a girl who died of plague and was then dressed as a bride in a white dress by her mother (that could also mean, in psychoanalytic symbolism, an expression of innocence) who had tried to take her away from the hands of a “monatto” who was going to place the corpse on the hearse.

This is a highly refined and deeply moving episode, mainly because the “monatto” proved to be a man capable of deep emotion and took the child with his arms with an attitude that could be defined as fatherly. On the chariot he chose for her a place that did not alter her appearance and her dress and promised her mother with absolute sincerity that he himself would provide for a proper burial. (Among other things it is worthy of the highest admiration the attitude of a mother whose faded beauty showed, while preserving the most absolute calm, that she herself and also a younger daughter were practically dying of plague and this she said with a sense of resignation that made it an even more touching episode).

This shows that even among the “monatti” there were people endowed with sympathetic and human feelings in clear opposition to (the few "monatti" who, for their own personal interests, wanted the plague to last). Manzoni is credited with having been able to describe in a masterly manner a remarkably wide category of people among whom one can find both cruel men and criminals but also individuals endowed with compassionate hearts and worthy of being entrusted with the responsibility for giving the final resting place to so many people struck by death.

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5 In literature or better in filmology we have the example of a challenge to the plague in "The Seventh Seal" of Bergman that defies death in a game with bags. And in the theater, we have also a challenge to the plague in "The State of Siege" by A. Camus. And even in the movie "The Double Life of Veronique" death is personified and drag slowly on the scene. Finally, in the ballet "Giselle", in a version at La Scala with Carla Fracci, also faces the death with his face in a window shortly before the death of the same Giselle.

6 Vernaccia is a type of wine.

7 In the show rather, Don Rodrigo will be a crazy ride and then fall to the ground dead.

8 As it will happen for Cottard, a character of in the novel “The plague” by A. Camus.
But two people deserve a special attention: Father Cristoforo and Father Felice.

Father Cristopher, who is a counterpart of the protagonist of: "The Steppe" by A. Cechov, though the latter was quite different, as he was a man of deep religious convictions that enabled him to occupy a notable place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. He preferred to look after his elderly parents, but what appears most impressive is his deep interest in his financial well-being that induced him to join the business world.

Father Cristopher, reminiscent of Jean Vengeant (the protagonist of V. Hugo’s novel “les Misérables) is the apostle of the true Christian Charity and a follower (worthy of St. Francis whose cassock he wore) of the Gospel, even in its most authentic and strict rules) but it is above all a man who wanted to redeem himself (for a sort of self-punishment for a murder he had committed, though involuntarily) by doing all the good works he could for the others. His key words were: forgive, always forgive though he realized that his attempt to remove (in the Freudian sense of the term) the memory of the dead person failed, despite all his efforts that would encourage him to be a paradigmatic example of an absolute commitment to well doing. In fact, he continued to take care of the sick, though the plague had infected and was gradually killing him, (probably afflicting him with severe pains), which he constantly dedicated to God for mercy.

But even before the plague, the personality of the monk appeared of great interest because it showed to be provided with all the strength and the courage to oppose all forms of injustice, to defy Don Rodrigo and all the bullies he came across openly, even in the case it was inevitable to break some specific Franciscan rules such as the one banning the presence of women from the church at night. In such cases he chose to follow a moral rule transcending all purely formal restrictions and used to pronounce the famous saying: "omnia munda mundis", thus revealing, among other things, the possession of a culture not limited to the knowledge of the Latin language, but that included the theological and philosophical fields.

Father Cristoforo could be considered as the angel of forgiveness, or rather the purest expression of the message that led Francis from Assisi to love even “Sister Death”. (In his “Canticle of the Creatures” Francis said he also loved the death of the body). With reference to the plague, he is to be regarded as a true Apostle of Charity.

And the last moment of his life is perhaps the only one in which he reached a mental state of relief because, until the extreme limit of his strength he walked across the isolation hospital suffering from all the negative effects the plague could inflict, even when directed against a man of iron like our Friar.

The other representative of an absolute religious faith and a severe practice of the gospel was Father Felice, the head of the Capuchins, who was engaged in helping suffering people in the “isolation hospital”. His thanks to God for saving the lives of many people was combined with something psychologically much more important, that is his conviction he had not done enough for the people who were suffering there.

9 View A. Chekhov’s “The Steppe”, stories and novels, Sansoni Editore Milan.
10 View V. Hugo’s “Les Miserables”, Mondadori (Milan new Oscar).
11 In the “Canticle of the Creatures” as well as all other things, Francis also claims to love "our Sister Bodily Death".
12 Discovered by Yersin.
13 Dante also shows an iron will when severely ill can reach Ravenna and die in his bed with an effort of will which validates even the theories on the relationship not only psychosomatic but also somatopsychic.
The awareness of the inadequacy of his charity works drove him even to apologize to the people he tried to cure for what he could not do for them; this attitude was consistent with a personality for whom his poignant love for God (foreboding the Christological sense)\(^{14}\) anticipates the convictions of Father de Paneloux\(^{15}\) in "The Plague" by A. Camus (with a particular reference to Paneloux’s statement that when divine events occur, even if they are not understandable, they must be accepted) was a vital chord for Father Felice to which he devoted his whole life in a mental dimension that made Faith a support and motivating force of all psychic processes.

The psychologist might observe that one’s mind, which is typically the seat of conflicts among the various cerebral centers of the brain, and in particular between the conscious and the unconscious is the condition where there is a state of "happiness" like the one of Francis of Assisi. This mental dimension, in a strictly scientific sense, however, could also be defined as a monoideism, representing the basis of life where the commitment to his mission turned into special acts and even words that helped the patients to regain their vital vigour and give a meaning to their life.

Father Felice could be called the angel who fights the plague, gratifying himself both at a conscious and an unconscious level with his work and its accomplishment that, though inferior to his wishes, he can achieve.

Father Felice and brother Christopher are ideal characters but in the world there have been other men and women who have led exemplary lives such as the literary characters created by Manzoni: among the most famous ones we can find Teresa De Avila, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Mahatma Gandhi and Socrates\(^ {16}\).

Therefore, our assumption that in literature there are characters that, as Pirandello stated, are more alive than real creatures, is proved by comparing literary characters with living persons.

The different reactions to the catastrophes described in literature also reflect real experiences lived to the full.

Beside, we must add that there were some of the protagonists of the novel who were not infected by the plague and were not, then, mentioned by Manzoni at all in his description of the epidemic. They are, in particular, the Unnamed, the Father Provincial of the Capuchins as well as less important individuals such as Bortolo and even Agnes as well as the now "buried alive" Virginia De Leyva (the famous Nun of Monza).

In conclusion it is worthwhile to make a brief comment on the attitude of the doctors who had to face a disease of which they quite complete ignored the cause and knew only its terrible infective effect. Among them was Ludovico Settala, who, though in possession of a clear notion of the nosographical disease, incurred the hatred of all those whose attention he tried to draw to its nature. Unfortunately, he lived in a cultural environment in which the spreaders might not exist (probably in an insignificant percentage) but where everybody believed in the presence of witches whom Ludovico Settala was favorable to condemn to the stake without realizing the contradiction between his right opinion on the epidemic nature of the plague and the absurdity of a carnal intercourse between the devil and a woman.

\(^{14}\) In the sense of Teilhard de Chardin.
\(^{15}\) Means the affirmation of Paneloux mention that, even when they happen incomprehensible events such as the death of innocent children, we must accept the will of God because God wants it, and can not be among the All and the Nothing choose Nothing.
\(^{16}\) Especially, who had been given the chance to escape from jail but rejected it as he maintained that a citizen must in no case break the law of his country.
The psychologist can only admit that everyone living the plague or any other scourge lives it in a personal way and often puts into relief some aspects of one’s personality that without this dramatic experience would have remained unknown even to the person involved.

We can therefore agree with the assumption of Father Paneloux in "The Plague" which basically distinguishes a religion at the time of peace from one at the time of the plague, and can also agree with the assumption that a serious scourge affecting a mass of people, often alters the psychological connotations to the point, for example, that a man who was cured for the plague is not exactly the same person from the mental point of view, as he was before making the painful experience.

And, broadly speaking, this may be referred also to a community of people that have been hit by a catastrophic event that in every case affects the mental dimension of all those who have suffered for its impact leaving an indelible mark in everybody’s mind for the whole of his life.¹⁷

¹⁷ See on this in "The Plague" by A. Camus's character Rambert, that after desired so anxious to see his wife, when he succeeds after the epidemic, the feeling of cuddling a stranger.