**Materiali lezione Roberta Gefter 10/9, “ Epidemie e orrori del contagio nella letteratura inglese”**

**SUGGERIMENTI CRITICI\***

**Il docente è disponibile a consigliare eventuali alternative che non siano in lingua inglese:**

**Allan Conrad Christensen, Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Contagion ‘Our feverish contact’, Routledge, 2011.** Si veda l’introduzione (scaricabile su Library Genesis)

**Sul concetto di malattia, contagio e cultura:**

**R. Girard, The Plague in Literature (1974)(**Jstor, allegato nella cartella materiali)Un saggio in cui il famoso critico espone la sua teoria del doppio mimetico e del capro espiatorio. Solo menzionata nella lezione, complessa ma affascinante

**S.Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 1978 (Malattia come metafora)**

**Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy, Vintage, 1992. “The Way We Write Now: Syphilis and AIDS”, pp 188.208 (fotocopie/pdf su richiesta, volume in biblioteca di filosofia e lingue.**

**TESTI PRIMARI**

**Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales**.

Beidler, Peter G. “The Plague and Chaucer's Pardoner.” *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1982, pp. 257–269. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25093795. Accessed 7 Sept. 2020](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093795.%20Accessed%207%20Sept.%202020).

**W.SHAKESPEARE**

*Alas, poor country,  
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot  
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;  
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems A modern ecstasy. The dead man’s knell  
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men’s lives Expire before the flowers in their caps,  
Dying or ere they sicken. (****Macbeth, Act IV, sc. 3)***

I prithee,daughter,do not make me mad:

I will not trouble thee,my child;farewell. We’ll no more meet,no more see one another; But yet thou art my flesh,my blood, my daughter;

Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,

Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,

A plague-sore,an embossed carbunde,  
In my corrupted blood. (***King Lear* Act II, 4.)**

**Journal of the Plague Year, Daniel Defoe, 1722**

Websource: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d783/6e710cf3ea0a80e2ade0f9ecbe58d1bc0a94.pdf>

* “Observations or Memorials of the most remarkable occurrences, as well public as private, which happened in London during the last great visitation in 1665. Written by a CITIZEN who continued all the while in London. Never made publick before”.

un interessante link di approfondimento (student-friendly)

<https://www.londonfictions.com/daniel-defoe-a-journal-of-the-plague-year.html>

I now began to consider seriously with my Self, con-cerning my own Case, and how I should dispose of my self; that is to say, whether I should resolve to stay in London, or shut up my House and flee, as many of my Neighbours did. I have set this particular down so fully, because I know not but it may be of Moment to those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same Distress, and to the same Manner of making their Choice, and therefore I desire this Account may pass with them, rather for a Direction to themselves to act by, than a History of my actings, seeing it may not be of one Farthing value to them to note what became of me.

I had two important things before me; the one was; the carrying on my Business and Shop; which was con-siderable, and in which was embark'd all my Effects in, the World; and the other was the Preservation of my' Life in so dismal a Calamity, as I saw apparently was coming upon the whole City; and which however great it was, my Fears perhaps as well as other Peoples, represented to be much greater than it could be. And here I may be able to make an Observation or two of my own, which may be of use hereafter to those, into whose Hands this may come, if they should ever see | the like dreadful Visitation, (1.) The Infection generally came into the Houses of the Citizens, by the Means of their Servants, who, they were obliged to send up and down the Streets for Necessaries, that is to say, for Food or Physick, to Bake- houses, Brew-houses, Shops, &c., and who going necessarily thro' the Streets into Shops, Markets, and the like, it was impossible, but that they should one way or other, meet with distempered people, who conveyed the fatal Breath into them, and they brought it Home to the Families, to which they belonged. (2.) It was a great Mistake, that such a great City as this had but one Pest-House; for had there been, j instead of one Pest-House viz, beyond *Bunhil-Fields;* ( where, at most, they could receive, perhaps, 200 or 300 People; I say, had there instead of that one been several Pest-houses, every one able to contain a thousand People without lying two in a Bed, or two Beds in a Room; and had every Master of a Family, as soon as any Servant especially, had been taken sick in his House, been obliged to send them to the next Pest-House, if they were willing, as many were, and had the Examiners done the like among the poor People, when any had been stricken with the Infection; I say, had this been done where the People were willing (not otherwise) and the Houses not been shut, I am perswaded, and was all the While of that Opinion, that not so many, by several Thousands, had died; for it was observed, and I could give several Instances within the Compass of my own Knowledge, where a Servant had been taken sick, and the Family had either Time to send them out or retire from the House, and leave the sick Person, as I have said above, they had all been preserved; whereas, when upon one, or more sickning in a Family, the House has been shut up, the whole Family have perished, and the Bearers been oblig'd to go in to fetch out the Dead Bodies, not being able to bring them to the Door; and at last none left to do it.

(This put it out of Question to me, that the Cala-mity was spread by Infection, that is to say, by some certain Steams, or Fumes, which the Physicians call *Efflu-via*, by the Breath, or by the Sweat, or by the Stench of the Sores of the sick Persons, or some other way, per-haps, beyond even the Reach of the Physicians them-selves, which *Effluvia* affected the Sound, who come within certain Distances of the Sick, immediately pene-trating the Vital Parts of the said sound Persons, putting their Blood into an immediate ferment, and agitating their Spirits to that Degree which it was found they were agitated; and so those newly infected Persons communicated it in the same Manner to others; and this I shall give some Instances of, that cannot but convince those who seriously consider it; and I cannot but with some Wonder, find some People, now the Contagion is over, talk of its being an immediate Stroke from Heaven, without the Agency of Means, having Commission to strike this and that particular Person, and none other; which I look upon with Contempt,as the Effect of mani-fest Ignorance and Enthusiasm; likewise the Opinion of others, who talk of Infection being carried on by the Air only, by carrying with it vast Numbers of Insects, and invisible Creatures, who enter into the Body with the Breath, or even at the Pores with the Air, and there generate, or emit most acute Poisons, or poisonous Ovae, or Eggs, which mingle themselves with the Blood, and so infect the Body; a Discourse full of learned Simpli-city, and manifested to be so by universal Experience; but I shall say more to this Case in its Order.

I must here take farther Notice that Nothing was more fatal to the Inhabitants of this City, than the Supine Negligence of the People themselves, who during the long Notice, or Warning they had of the Visitation, yet made no Provision for it, by laying in Store of Provi-sions, or of other Necessaries; by which they might have liv'd retir'd, and within their own Houses, as I have observed, others did, and who were in a great Measure preserv'd by that Caution; nor were the, after they were a little hardened to it so shye of conversing with one another, when actually infected, as they were at first, no tho' they knew it.

You may be sure also, that the Report of these things lost nothing in the Carriage, the Plague was it self very terrible, and the Distress of the People very great, as you may observe of what I have said: But the Rumor was infinitely greater, and it must not be wonder'd, that our Friends abroad, as my Brother's Correspondents in particular were told there, namely in *Portugal* and *Italy* where he chiefly traded, that in *London* there died twenty thousand in a Week; that the dead Bodies lay unburied by Heaps; that the living were not sufficient to bury the dead, or the Sound to look after the Sick; that all the Kingdom was infected likewise, so that it was an universal Malady, such as was never heard of in those parts of the World; and they could hardly believe us, when we gave them an Account how things really were, and how there was not above one Tenth part of the People dead; that there was 500,000 left that lived all the time in the Town; that now the People began to walk the Streets again, and those, who were fled, to return, there was no Miss of the usual Throng of people in the Streets, ex-cept as every Family might miss their Relations and Neighbours, and the like; I say they could not believe these things; and if Enquiry were now to be made in *Naples*, or in other Cities on the Coast of *Italy*, they would tell you that there was a dreadful Infection in *London* so many Years ago; in which, *as above*, there died Twenty Thousand in a Week, *&c*. **Just as we have had it re-ported in *London*, that there was a Plague in the City of *Naples*, in the Year 1656, in which there died 20000 People in a Day, of which I have had very good Satis-faction, that it was utterly false.**

But these extravagant Reports were very prejudical to our Trade as well as unjust and injurious in them- selves; for it was a long Time after the Plague was quite over, before our Trade could recover it self in those parts of the World;

I can go no farther here, I should be counted censorious, and perhaps unjust, if i should enter into the unpleasing Work of reflecting, whatever Cause there was for it, upon the Unthankfulness and Return of all manner of Wickedness among us, which I was much an Eye-Witness of my self; I shall conclude the Account of this calamitous Year therefore with a coarse but sincere Stanza of my own, which I plac'd at the End of my ordinary Memorandums, the same Year they were written:

A dreadful Plague in London was, In the Year Sixty Five,

Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls Away; yet I alive!

F I N I S.

**Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (1826)**

Let us live for each other and for happiness; let us seek peace in our dear home, near the inland murmur of streams, and the gracious waving of trees, the beauteous vesture of earth, and sublime pageantry of the skies. Let us leave "life," that we may live.

***“The plague was not in London alone, it was every where — it came on us, as Ryland had said, like a thousand packs of wolves, howling through the winter night, gaunt and fierce.  When once disease was introduced into the rural districts, its effects appeared more horrible, more exigent, and more difficult to cure, than in towns.  There was a companionship in suffering there, and, the neighbours keeping constant watch on each other, and inspired by the active benevolence of Adrian, succour was afforded, and the path of destruction smoothed.  But in the country, among the scattered farm-houses, in lone cottages, in fields, and barns, tragedies were acted harrowing to the soul, unseen, unheard, unnoticed.  Medical aid was less easily procured, food was more difficult to obtain, and human beings, unwithheld by shame, for they were unbeheld of their fellows, ventured on deeds of greater wickedness, or gave way more readily to their abject fears.”***

Have any of you, my readers, observed the ruins of an anthill immediately after its destruction? At first it appears entirely deserted of its former inhabitants; in a little time you see an ant struggling through the upturned mold; they reappear by twos and threes, running hither and thither in search of their lost companions. Such were we upon the earth, wondering aghast at the effects of pestilence. Our empty habitations remained, but the dwellers were gathered to the shades of the tomb.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

From The Last Man. A science-fiction novel published in 1826, The Last Man purports to tell of a late twenty-first-century England consumed by plague. Even though it was one of the Frankenstein author’s favorite books, The Last Man was met with critical derision upon publication—“the offspring of a diseased imagination, and of a most polluted taste,” read one contemporary review—and only sporadically kept in print until a 1965 American edition. Shelley died in London in 1851 at the age of fifty-three.

As the rules of order and pressure of laws were lost, some began with hesitation and wonder to transgress the accustomed uses of society. Palaces were deserted, and the poor man dared at length, unreproved, intrude into the splendid apartments, whose very furniture and decorations were an unknown world to him. It was found that, though at first the stop put to all circulation of property, had reduced those before supported by the factitious wants of society to sudden and hideous poverty, yet when the boundaries of private possession were thrown down, the products of human labor at present existing were more, far more, than the thinned generation could possibly consume. To some among the poor this was matter of exultation. We were all equal now; magnificent dwellings, luxurious carpets, and beds of down were afforded to all. Carriages and horses, gardens, pictures, statues, and princely libraries, there were enough of these even to superfluity; and there was nothing to prevent each from assuming possession of his share. We were all equal now; but near at hand was an equality still more leveling, a state where beauty and strength, and wisdom, would be as vain as riches and birth. The grave yawned beneath us all, and its prospect prevented any of us from enjoying the ease and plenty which in so awful a manner was presented to us.

Where could we turn and not find a desolation pregnant with the dire lesson of example? The fields had been left uncultivated, weeds and gaudy flowers sprung up—or where a few wheat fields showed signs of the living hopes of the husbandman, the work had been left halfway, the plowman had died beside the plow; the horses had deserted the furrow, and no seedsman had approached the dead; the cattle unattended wandered over the fields and through the lanes; the tame inhabitants of the poultry yard, balked of their daily food, had become wild—young lambs were dropped in flower gardens, and the cow stalled in the hall of pleasure. Sickly and few, the country people neither went out to sow nor reap, but sauntered about the meadows, or lay under the hedges, when the inclement sky did not drive them to take shelter under the nearest roof. Many of those who remained secluded themselves; some had laid up stores which should prevent the necessity of leaving their homes—some deserted wife and child, and imagined that they secured their safety in utter solitude. Such had been one man’s plan, and he was discovered dead and half-devoured by insects, in a house many miles from any other, with piles of food laid up in useless superfluity. Others made long journeys to unite themselves to those they loved, and arrived to find them dead.

London did not contain above a thousand inhabitants, and this number was continually diminishing. Most of them were country people, come up for the sake of change; the Londoners had sought the country. The busy eastern part of the town was silent, or at most you saw only where, half from cupidity, half from curiosity, the warehouses had been more ransacked than pillaged: bales of rich India goods, shawls of price, jewels, and spices, unpacked, strewn the floors. In some places the possessor had to the last kept watch on his store and died before the barred gates. The massy portals of the churches swung creaking on their hinges, and some few lay dead on the pavement. The wretched female, loveless victim of vulgar brutality, had wandered to the toilet of high-born beauty and, arraying herself in the garb of splendor, had died before the mirror which reflected to herself alone her altered appearance. Women whose delicate feet had seldom touched the earth in their luxury had fled in fright and horror from their homes till, losing themselves in the squalid streets of the metropolis, they had died on the threshold of poverty.

The hunger of Death was now stung more sharply by the diminution of his food; or was it that before, the survivors being many, the dead were less eagerly counted? Now each life was a gem, each human breathing form of far, oh far more worth than subtlest imagery of sculptured stone; and the daily, nay, hourly decrease visible in our numbers visited the heart with sickening misery. This summer extinguished our hopes, the vessel of society was wrecked, and the shattered raft, which carried the few survivors over the sea of misery, was riven and tempest tossed. Man existed by twos and threes; man, the individual who might sleep and wake and perform the animal functions; but man, in himself weak, yet more powerful in congregated numbers than wind or ocean; man, the queller of the elements, the lord of created nature, the peer of demigods, existed no longer.

**Farewell to the patriotic scene, to the love of liberty and well-earned meed of virtuous aspiration! Farewell to crowded senate, vocal with the councils of the wise**, whose laws were keener than the sword blade tempered at Damascus! Farewell to kingly pomp and warlike pageantry; the crowns are in the dust, and the wearers are in their graves! Farewell to the desire of rule, and the hope of victory; to high vaulting ambition, to the appetite for praise, and the craving for the suffrage of their fellows! The nations are no longer! No senate sits in council for the dead; no scion of a time-honored dynasty pants to rule over the inhabitants of a charnel house; the general’s hand is cold, and the soldier has his untimely grave dug in his native fields, unhonored, though in youth. The marketplace is empty, the candidate for popular favor finds none whom he can represent. To chambers of painted state farewell! To midnight revelry, and the panting emulation of beauty, to costly dress and birthday show, to title and the gilded coronet, farewell!

**Farewell to the giant powers of man—to knowledge that could pilot the deep-drawing bark through the opposing waters of shoreless ocean, to science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air, to the power that could put a barrier to mighty waters, and set in motion wheels and beams and vast machinery, that could divide rocks of granite or marble and make the mountains plain!**

Farewell to the arts—to eloquence, which is to the human mind as the winds to the sea, stirring and then allaying it. Farewell to poetry and deep philosophy, for man’s imagination is cold, and his inquiring mind can no longer expatiate on the wonders of life, for “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest!”—to the graceful building, which in its perfect proportion transcended the rude forms of nature! Farewell to sculpture, where the pure marble mocks human flesh, and in the plastic expression of the culled excellencies of the human shape shines forth the god! Farewell to painting, the high wrought sentiment and deep knowledge of the artist’s mind in pictured canvas! Farewell to music, and the sound of song, to the marriage of instruments, where the concord of soft and harsh unites in sweet harmony and gives wings to the panting listeners, whereby to climb heaven and learn the hidden pleasures of the eternals! Farewell to the well-trod stage; a truer tragedy is enacted on the world’s ample scene that puts to shame mimic grief. To high-bred comedy and the low buffoon, farewell! Man may laugh no more.

**H.G.Wells, *The War of The Worlds* (1898)**

And before we judge them [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished Bison and the Dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?

— Chapter I, "The Eve of the War”.

**Testi primari contemporanei**

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of wonders: a novel of the plague*, Penguin, 2001.(Annus Mirabilis, Neri Pozza, 2001)

William Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil* (1925) Vintage. Il Velo Dipinto, Adelphi, 2006.

