

# The Spanish Flu of 1918 in Literature: Life of Medics in John O'Hara's *The Doctor's Son*

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## ABSTRACT

Pandemics in literature are a source of multidisciplinary information. It not only concerns a fictional formation of narratives, there is an equal chance of reference to real life experiences in pandemic fiction. The lives depicted in pandemic fiction captures the medium of the spread of disease and the challenges of daily life amidst the implementation of policies to control its spread. The thematic representation of pandemics which includes the symbolic meanings and traditional beliefs have also been a major inclusion in such narratives. The authors also refer to the dystopia created by the disease and its part in gradually decreasing the population. The Spanish Flu is one of the pandemics that, although overpowered in fiction by stories of WWI, remains significant subject of discussion in literary texts. The Influenza spread during the year 1918 (the Spanish Flu) is dealt with by authors from various perspectives. John O'Hara's *The Doctor's Son* focuses on the medics and their lives during the pandemic along with the troubles, both physical and mental, that they have fought along the responsibility of saving lives. This paper is an attempt to revisit the story in order to address the relevance of pandemics in fiction.

**Keywords:** Pandemic, The Spanish Flu, Disease, Death, WWI

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## INTRODUCTION

The restricted number of literary texts associated with pandemics has been a challenge in researching the development of pandemic history in literature. The inclusivity of this subject has been accepted openly in the late nineteenth century which gives the researchers a limited scope of reading works related to pandemics. The works produced earlier than that have a confined scope of referring to pandemics with only a few of them to remain solely based on the theme of pestilence. The subject of pandemic fiction as recognised in the later years of nineteenth century has direct reference to the hopeless figures and devastated souls resulting from the disturbance in lives. The position of pandemics is secured in literature with the acceptance of medical and scientific knowledge on global level. Otherwise even the mention of pandemics has been considered ominous. Myths based on the outbreak of pandemics have restricted the stories to depict a heavenly penalty from the religious perspective which has resulted in restricted reference to diseases only for the purpose of developing a moral understanding of the sins among the readers. Evidence of this approach can be found in literature of the classical writers like Homer and Sophocles. It was not until the acceptance of the disease as curable that people have erased fallacies built around pandemics. Though this has also been cured with the development of the genre of pandemic fiction which enumerates some of the hidden works of literature that have tried to portray the condition of sickness engulfing the human population through indirect references.

It can be asserted that the plots have reality veiled in fiction. Authors have witnessed death with their own eyes which have also helped them in forming stories close to reality. Numerous works directly establish a connection between illness and fiction. Therefore, the works can be studied from a multidisciplinary approach. One such example that takes reference from history is John O'Hara's *The Doctor's Son* (1935). John O'Hara has portrayed the lives of doctors during the Spanish Flu of 1918. This has been the same year that the world has suffered the pain instilled by WWI. While dealing with a catastrophe embarked upon the humans due to political conflicts, the world has also witnessed horrific images of death and suffering caused from the Influenza. Though the literature is scarce in depicting the Spanish Flu due to the focus on WWI, this 'Forgotten Flu' finds a few referential texts written around the 1930s and 1940s like William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows*. O'Hara has written the story from the viewpoint of the son of an exhausted doctor who has to deal not only with cases of Influenza but also the frantic

behaviour of the patients and their relatives if the case worsens. This shows how the doctors of the time had to take care of their safety from the people they are helping:

He would put a revolver on the floor beside him or in the tray that was bracketed to the operating table. He had to have the revolver, because here and there among the people who would come to his office, there would be a wild man or woman, threatening him, shouting that they would not leave until he left with them, and that if their baby died they would come back and kill him. (O'Hara 7)

Sleep depravity runs as a distinct theme in the story. It is shown that influenza cases have increased the number of patients extensively restricting the time of rest for doctors. The responsibility of a doctor to treat the patient against all odds has been portrayed in the story to direct at the work-load. Doctor Malloy is shown in the novel to sleep two consecutive days due to over-exertion. It is probably true because half of the population was wiped by the flu in 1918. The desperation of the loss during WWI was multiplied by the Flu that eventually caused distrust among people. O'Hara mentions the work pressure on the doctors both aged and young due to the rapid spread of the disease. An efficient solution formulated by the authorities was to assign the interns to replace those doctors who could not manage to fight the fatigue from overwork. This is how Doctor Myers has been introduced into the story. The graduate from Philadelphia has been assigned the task of taking charge of Doctor Malloy's patients:

The State stepped in, and when a doctor got sick or exhausted so he literally couldn't hold his head up any longer, they would send a young man from the graduating class of one of the Philadelphia medical schools to take over the older man's practice. (O' Hara 8)

The story is set in Collieryville (O'Hara's fictional version of Minersville), Pennsylvania which has been in discussion for its prominent medical history in terms of education as well as facilities. It depicts the not only the emotional edge associated with the flu but also the misuse of the disease to fulfil human desires. The story reveals a lot human emotions varying from inability to get treatment on time to extra-marital affairs. The death of five-year old girl while Myers and James were trying to treat her becomes a picture of cold reality that people have witnessed in reality too. The actions taken by the state to control the cases have been to restrict the movement of people to avoid massive gatherings in public places. As a result, the churches and schools have been closed to avoid the risks:

Then the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania closed down the schools and churches, and forbade all congregating. If you wanted an ice cream soda you had to have it put in a cardboard container; you couldn't have it at the fountain in a glass. We were glad when school closed, because it meant a holiday, and the epidemic had touched very few of us. (8)

This, however, could not stop the flu from spreading and the result was the deaths that outnumbered expectations. John M. Barry's *The Great Influenza* (2004) validates the closing of schools and churches during the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in various places to reduce the effect of flu and restrict it to the extent it has already spread:

In Cumberland, Maryland, a gritty railroad and industrial city in the heart of a coal-mining region—where one actually could throw a stone across the Potomac River into West Virginia—to prevent the spread of the disease schools and churches had already been closed, all public gathering places had been closed, and stores had been ordered to close early. (Barry 344)

Mrs. Evans' relationship with Myers is something that only literature can bring to surface. Historical records provide the numbers and general estimates of deaths. They can only provide information of political and commercial importance. The literature touches the aspects that are divorced from the generalised information. This provides an inclusive record of the stories that have been escaped from the recorded history. An establishment of these two disciplines is carried out by the different ways the reality is portrayed. One seeks truth in its raw form, other tries to give way to experiences that were felt and not recorded. Mrs. Evans' case is one such example. Her feigned sickness to meet Myers is not only questionable in the eyes of her daughter Edith but also in the eyes of James. But a different opinion that arises from this episode is how the fatal disease has been misused in the name of personal benefit. Apart from monetary benefits that were caused during the pandemic by smuggling goods, this has been another kind of greed which has also constricted the time that Myers could give to another patients.

Elizabeth Outka addresses the difficulties that different professions have faced during the Influenza in her book *Viral Modernism* (2020). She tries to present the impressions of the disease through various fictional and non-fictional works on sickness. About the medics, she remarks:

While discoveries during the pandemic led to important advances in public health and medicine, efforts to treat patients during the pandemic remained woefully ineffectual; victories were scarce. The flu was, in general, seen as an embarrassing failure for a medical establishment that had otherwise made astonishing

progress in the treatment of diseases, and doctors and nurses were plagued with a sense of helplessness. (Outka 28)

This resonates with O'Hara's representation of the doctor in terms of the load he had on his shoulders of treating the patients while merely sleeping. It also gives the idea of how the doctor's son reacts to the deaths that he is not prepared of and the way he vomits while watching the cold body of man lying dead in his room. History gives authenticity to the narratives written partially on the basis of real lives and partially on the imagination of how reality can be expressed. Pandemic fiction is a more approachable way of depicting behavioural patterns of people who have witnessed the sick from close.

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