

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 22
Issue 1 *Special Issue: New Illnesses—Old
Problems, Old Illnesses—New Problems*

Article 2

June 2014

New Illnesses—Old Problems, Old Illnesses—New Problems

Sander L. Gilman
University of Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [German Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Gilman, Sander L. (1998) "New Illnesses—Old Problems, Old Illnesses—New Problems," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1431>

This Introductory Material is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

New Illnesses—Old Problems, Old Illnesses—New Problems

Abstract

This present collection of essays concerns the representation of illness in literature...

Keywords

illness, German literature

New Illnesses—Old Problems
Old Illnesses—New Problems

Sander L. Gilman
University of Chicago

This present collection of essays concerns the representation of illness in literature. The time frame is “modern” and the focus is on turn-of-the-century Europe. This is not accidental, as the problems raised in this arena have been structured by the European modernist discourse on “disease.” We—at the end of another century—still stand in thrall to models of illness which haunt us from the past. The end of the twentieth century begins to look somewhat like the end of the nineteenth. The long age of “peace” that marked the close of that age, a peace disrupted by innumerable “minor” wars fought by great powers against smaller states or among the smaller states themselves, seems to have settled in the new long “peace” which began in 1945 and continues until today. Likewise, the nineteenth century was an age of mass illness, of tuberculosis, syphilis, cholera, that seemed to be beginning to be answered by the new medical science, the science of the laboratory and of public health. The late twentieth century suddenly has become the age of illness again. Cholera, tuberculosis, syphilis, and AIDS mark the close of the twentieth century in the public’s fantasy as surely as versions of these diseases marked the last *fin de siècle*.

Yet, of course, the illnesses are not the same—they have different contexts, are read in different ways, in the complex Western cultures in which we live, than they or their parallels were a hundred years ago. But there is more than a slight sense of continuity. Part of this may well be the simple sense of repetition built into the calendar—for turns of centuries have a great symbolic significance in the meaning we attribute to the calendar. But there are other meanings that do transcend merely the markers of chronological

time. Thus there are meanings with which we wrestle whose structure was cast a hundred years ago. One can learn from the debates about the meaning of an illness even after a century. Thus the anxiety associated with the debate about compulsory reporting and hospitalization that accompanied tuberculosis has interesting parallels in our contemporary debates about compulsory reporting and hospitalization of people who are HIV positive. Thus the history of “infection” as discussed in Laura Otis’s essay in this volume and the pattern of the self-representation of AIDS in the former GDR have interesting parallels. It is not the same illness which is represented, but the questions that arise, questions of the possibility of cure, of stigmatization, of family responsibility, of anxiety about the body politic, are all present in both times with both diseases, in colonial Britain and Germany as well as in the pseudo-Marxist culture of the GDR. Illnesses such as tuberculosis can be understood as a model for a (if not the) most pernicious and widely spread fatal illness of the nineteenth century. One can focus on the period after 1882, after the beginning of a modern, scientific understanding of the illness, and see the contradictions, continuities, and problems raised by this new “science” of illness. The parallels will be indeed to AIDS but also to the “new” tuberculosis, which comes to be associated in the 1990s with AIDS. Here the debates about control, about meaning, and about focus come to be the means of providing a sense of the recycling of the symbolic structures associated with illness at the close of the millennium.

In the present collection of essays, the focus is on the problems of representing illness. It does not deal with (autobiographical) narratives of illness or the idea that the practice of medicine itself is a discourse. In limiting the scope of this volume to “illness and cultural representation,” we reveal the riches of the project. There are a number of different models for discussing the question of representing illness in culture, beginning with Ulrike Kistner’s study of the problems of representation within medicine itself. In specific case studies from the turn of the century, Laura Otis looks at the idea of colonization and discovery in Conan Doyle; readers will also find here Edward Brinkley on Wilde and D’Annunzio representing homosexuality as pathology; Iris Bruce on Franz Kafka’s lesser known cousin Woody Allen and their fantasies of illness; Misha Kavka (no relation to Franz or Woody) on shell shock and masculinity after World War I; Roland Dollinger on the problem of **society and physical trauma** in Alfred Döebelin’s work; Stephanie

D'Allesandro on the broader question of Weimar Germany's representation of sexuality; and finally, Denis Sweet on the short-lived discourse on AIDS in the former GDR. All represent the problems of the old disease in new guise—some in the recapitulation of models of the past, some in the foreshadowing of our present as their future. Here the power of the theme of “illness and literature” can be seen and understood as both representing the past and creating an archeology for our present understanding of the past.