

OANA MUREȘAN, *Confluente medico-literare în literatura engleză modernă: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle și Aldous Huxley* [Medical and Literary Confluences in Modern English Literature: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Aldous Huxley] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2019)

What do Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Aldous Huxley have in common, beyond the era in which they created and their ventures in both the medical and the literary world? The answer to this question takes the form of a careful, elegant, and unitary interdisciplinary analysis in Oana Mureșan's book, which was based on her doctoral research: *Confluente medico-literare în literatura engleză modernă: sir Arthur Conan Doyle și Aldous Huxley*, published by Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca (2019).

In her attempt to offer an exhaustive perspective on the two modern English writers, Oana Mureșan interweaves elements of literary analysis with explanations, extrapolations, and definitions related to the history of medicine, pharmacy, toxicology, and medical anthropology. The examined works are set against the historical background, thus underlining the role of literature as a source of information for medicine, but also the biunivocal influence between life and literature, without ignoring the fictional elements specific to both Conan Doyle's detective fiction and Aldous Huxley's novels of ideas and essays. By analysing their literary works, Oana Mureșan portrays an era marked by remarkable breakthroughs, but also by the limitations they reveal, especially in the fields of medicine, education, forensics, neurophysiology, pharmacology, psychology, and toxicology. The historical and medical background expounded in the introduction offers the reader a captivating perspective on the discovery of anaesthesia, the thermometer, asepsis, penicillin, culminating in organ transplantation, but also on the fight against aggressive epidemics – a perspective that is relevant and illustrative for understanding the innovative medical-literary journey.

The narrative thread is often sprinkled with spicy and fascinating details (opiophilia and creativity), literary references (Baudelaire consumed opium and Rimbaud hashish), and Huxley's own experiments with psychedelic substances in his attempt to enter the fascinating world beyond the consciousness, all contributing to the book's informativeness, relevance, and attractiveness. We learn, for instance, that not only Huxley, but also Conan Doyle experienced the effects of various substances, but while Doyle had a medical background, Huxley researched and published essays on medical topics, most likely out of his

frustration of not being able to fulfil his dream, that of becoming a doctor, due to his severe visual impairments.

The chapters dedicated to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle examine the medical elements in the sixty *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, bringing to the fore the duo Sherlock Holmes – the detective – and Dr. Watson, his devoted friend, partner, biographer, and the author's alter ego. Among these medical elements, there is a wide range of active chemicals (prussic acid, ethyl alcohol, belladonna, chloroform, cocaine) poisons (curare, strychnine, venoms), and drugs that were used, according to the vision of the time, as remedies, poisons, anaesthesia, stimulants, or to simulate a pathological condition, Doyle himself experimenting during his student years with belladonna injections into the conjunctival sac to simulate mydriasis. The origin of tobacco, alkaloids, and opioids is presented systematically and analytically, insisting on one of the most controversial aspects of *The Adventures*, namely the detective's drug addiction (to cocaine and nicotine as mental stimulants), a commonplace in the society of the time (cocaine was snorted or used as gargle, in candies, ointments, Coca-Cola) and in medical research (Freud had temporarily advocated the use of cocaine as a nerve tonic). By juxtaposing scientific information with contradictory literary evidence, Oana Mureşan deciphers the rationale for intentional medical inaccuracies in Doyle's detective stories. Whether these refer to the effects of plant roots, killer jellyfish, poisons (e.g., snake venom in the story *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*), their role is to create suspense and enhance the dramatic effect, which is further amplified through the descriptions of the victims' faces distorted by a violent death.

The constant oscillation between extensive documentation on the various substances and their origin, the description (including statistics) of forensic techniques and methods of investigation related to the field of fantasy, which "give the detective an aura of infallibility," once again proves that the writer sometimes decides "to sacrifice realism in favour of fiction," as Oana Mureşan concludes, thus proving that literature reflects life and life makes its own way into literature, with no dull overlapping of the two.

Aldous Huxley, whose literary career spanned beyond the middle of the twentieth century, has not been studied exhaustively, scientifically, and medically, to date. Oana Mureşan analyses some of his essays (the lesser-known part of his work) and novels, by focusing on medical aspects such as the bioethical issues in his utopias: genetic manipulation, psychopharmacology, cloning (*Brave New World*), his caution against excessive technology, the creation of substances capable of restricting human freedom or against "science without consciousness."

In his medical essays, Huxley presents the results of his experiments with mescaline and LSD as knowledge tools, with himself as the subject. He also deciphers and describes the causes of schizophrenic behaviour, the patients' loss of control over the transition between inner and outer reality (*The Doors of Perception*), the

duality of sublime and grotesque living, especially the negative, frightening visions, similar to the descent into hell, when the “doors of perception” open to the unknown realm of the “mind’s antipodes” (*Heaven and Hell*). In fictional form, the utopian novel *Island* exposes, among others, Huxley’s conception about hallucinogenic drugs (“the *moksha-medicine*” – in Sanskrit, *moksha* = liberation), while the testimonies in his correspondence also refer to the writer’s interest in hypnosis, mescaline, LSD and other hallucinogens, as gateways to the unseen world.

The biographical details of the two authors are impressive and relevant, both of them sharing a broken dream with refuge in literature: after 10 years of medical practice, Doyle gives up medicine in favour of writing, while Huxley is unable to pursue medical education because of his severe visual impairment; Doyle experiments with gelsemium tincture, whereas Huxley constantly tackles with psychedelic drugs as facilitators of mystical insight, with great potential benefits for art, science, and religion, and, eventually, he has an LSD-assisted death.

In his dystopian *Brave New World*, but especially in his speech *The Ultimate Revolution*, Huxley “foresaw a future in which pharmacology would create substances that could be used oppressively for the people’s psychological, genetic subjugation.¹” In today’s “brave new world”, forced into isolation by an invisible, ruthless foe, dominated by stress, insecurity, and dependence on technology, and with the eternal need for self-transcendence, Oana Mureșan’s book once again proves its relevance and achieves its goal through a methodical study, a pleasant reading similar to that of a novel, one that is accessible as well as informative, and which brings invaluable insight for both philologists and specialists in medical anthropology, alike.

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DOI: 10.26424/philobib.2021.26.1.10

¹ Original text: “prevestea un viitor în care famacologia va crea substanțe ce ar putea fi folosite în scop opresiv, pentru subjugarea psihologică, genetică” (Translation mine): Oana Mureșan, *Confluente medico-literare în literatura engleză modernă: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle și Aldoux Huxley* [Medical and Literary Confluences in Modern English Literature: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Aldoux Huxley] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2019), 146.