

Depictions of death and disease

[Life](#), [Death](#)



The use of the word “plague” is reserved for only the most momentous and devastating diseases in history. This word has been specifically set aside for diseases that strike a certain type of fear into the masses as with the Bubonic Plague, also called the “Black Death”, and the AIDS epidemic. The word has an effect of biblical proportions and epidemics like AIDS and the Bubonic Plague both display the social reaction to these maladies in the religious connections or rejections made toward both.

There is, also, evidence of the unraveling of complete societies due to these illnesses in the abandonment of the sufferers to their fates and the perpetuation of causation of these “plagues” to stories that confuse and confound communities into states of despair and disillusionment. The swiftness by which the “Black Death” struck victims to death is opposed to the lengthy period between the contraction of AIDS and a death that is not always certain or imminent. The words and descriptions of these diseases, however, did spread quite quickly and served as a lens by which society at the respected times viewed the chaos in the world.

The Bubonic Plague quickly sickened and killed its sufferers and this swiftness of the disease left little time for people to react, there was no predicting its path, no preventions, and no remedies. People expected death and the “Black Death” struck the consciousnesses of the people before the illness ever did. “‘And no bells tolled’, wrote a chronicler of Siena ‘and nobody wept no matter what his loss because almost everyone expected death.... and people said and believed, This is the end of the world’” (Tuchman, 413).

People also were cited as living joylessly, attending funerals with no tears and weddings with no cheer. With the feeling that this was indeed the end of the world, it was as if an ominous black cloud had accompanied this black plague, leaving much room for superstition and little for hysteria. There was little emotional and physical energy left for the afflicted communities to remain gripped in a hysterical frenzy for long periods when death became so commonplace. The feeling at the time was that an evil presence was surrounding the affected areas and this apocalyptic, creeping fear soon was replaced by emptiness.

There was no sense in tending to religious ideas, as many people died without being given their rites of death. In this way, many of the positive ideas of God and heaven were abandoned, as the people's sentiment was that God must have been responsible for attempting to exterminate the human race altogether. In the collective imaginations of religious persons all through the world, the "Black Death" was proof that the devil had won and God was no longer in support of the once devout.

There was little mercy for the sick and parents were even found to abandon their own children to their fates. The callousness of the living was written about in such a way that existence during these times was made to seem like a hellish tribulation, those who did tend to their families and the sick however were made to seem like saints. There seemed to be these pious individuals, who were revered as the sober and saintly men at a time when "men and woman wandered around as if mad..... because no one had any inclination to worry themselves about the future" (Tuchman, 417).

The “ Black Death” concept, then became a metaphor for the darkness, disorder, dementia, and despair that was part of the fear that the world was at it’s end and there was no future. The horror of both AIDS and the Bubonic Plague was fueled mostly by the uncertainty of each disease’s origin. Those in the “ Black Death” era looked to astrology and employed adjectives that referred back to nature itself as the culprit. According to Tuchman, the plague was said to be spread by “ sheets of fire”, “ a vast rein of fire” and “ foul blasts of wind”.

The metaphors here were probably not so much intended to be metaphors, but instead were parts of folklore that spread just as the disease did. The uncertainty of it’s origin certainly led to wild imaginations and a need for storytelling to put the horror into words, however magnificent and impossible these Eastern stories were. With AIDS, just as with the Bubonic Plague, the idea was that this disease originated from somewhere else, it presented itself as both geographically transcending and personally transforming. In this sense both were socially viewed as an invasion of a community and of the bodies of the afflicted.

The wording surrounding AIDS and the “ Black Death” made these afflictions seem like a retribution, as well. With the Bubonic Plague, it was the poor that were looked upon as being the most at risk while AIDS had and continues to have it’s own risk groups. Though both diseases proved indiscriminate in it’s victims with the idea of disease as retribution, there must be scapegoats to cognitively connect this reality. Sontag believes that the way AIDS is portrayed “ revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged” (683).

The scapegoats, however, are also the so-called “third world” countries of disease origin, such as AIDS. The same type of confusion and calamity surround the explanations of the origin of the disease. If it is not God’s wrath or some other supernatural event, then a more modern version of the “Black Death” stories can be found in the belief by some that AIDS was manufactured by man. This is truly the hallmark of AIDS as a modern “plague”, as the idea of the Bubonic Plague being manmade would not have been possible. This points to the collective imagination of those in fear of both disease and technology, a new phenomenon.

Many Africans subscribe to the idea, according to Sontag, that AIDS was manufactured in the United States by the CIA proving their suspicion toward technology and the American government. Americans, conversely, look at the spread of AIDS as originating from a primitive place, where the spread of the disease cannot be stopped by American, conventional technology. In either sense, the fear is projected toward the disease from an origin of an already instilled cultural belief. For Americans it is that what is “foreign” that is dangerous and to Africans what is American and technological is alarming and suspicious.

Sontag effectively explains the outcome of the plague metaphor in that no matter where a person resides geographically or what their beliefs may be as to the origin of what is deemed to be a plague, the malady becomes understood socially as inescapable. She does offer, however, the idea that Europeans tended to believe that they held some moral superiority over the origin of disease, condemning other countries for spreading disease, but

failing to observe their own role in spreading disease to indigenous peoples during colonization.

However, the diseases spread by Europeans were not viewed as plague-like or morally reprehensible. The idea that morality can be traced to disease and its afflictions is an interesting social phenomenon that equates “sick” with “dirty” or “immoral” and “healthy” with “moral”. “Health itself was eventually identified with these values, which were religious as well as mercantile, health being evidence of virtue as disease being evidence of depravity” (Sontag, 686).

This is evidence of the cultural values of the early twentieth century, according to the author, in the fact that middle class values and religious observation was seen as a deterrent from disease. Those, who led a life of supposed depravity, however were viewed as not only more likely to become ill, but more deserving of their suffering. AIDS has been portrayed in such a moral sense, that homosexuality and its immorality to some is the blame for the “plague” and a deserved consequence.

Sadly, the same callousness that was displayed in the abandonment of suffering children still occurs today in the social abandonment and outcasting of AIDS victims. According to Sontag, the disease metaphor is especially beneficial to anti-Liberals and those that wish to address issues of supposed moral decay. Therefore, Conservative opportunists have laden the language associated with AIDS to further political aims. In conclusion both the Bubonic Plague and the AIDS epidemic illustrate the ability of communities and cultures to transmit feelings of fear and the value of many social institutions within the context of a disease spread.

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Religion, politics, and the accusations and scapegoating of disease origin and spread permeate the spectrum of the social scene when such a heavily laden word as “plague” is perpetuated. With the fast spread of the first “plague” the idea that the end of the world was near was common. With the slower spread of AIDS in the Western world, however, a fierce anti-foreign, pro-technology, and anti-Liberal stance has been taken. Just as these diseases can devastate, so can the words and the world as it can slip into disorder and darkness.