

Year of wonders analysis essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout the novel *Year of Wonders*, significant changes can be seen to occur in a variety of characters as they encounter this time of adversity. The town, now Anglican, is of a puritan background and holds religious beliefs in very high regard. These beliefs change context throughout the novel as we see characters such as Aphra resort to charms and witchery.

Whilst they still do not attempt to explain the phenomena, they find themselves turning away from Religion and to superstitions for answers. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those of who become devout religiously out of fear and believe that atoning for their sins is the sole answer. However, there are a select few, privileged with an education and far ahead of their time, that turn away from their metaphysical beliefs and focus their attentions on combatting the disease using rationality and, without acknowledging it, attempt to approach the subject as a scientific matter. The plague divides the villagers as black magic and superstition begins to appear and plant its seeds in the cracks created by the fear brought about by the plague. Aphra Bont is a prime example of an average person pressured into wayward actions under the burden of such adversity as the plague.

Aphra goes against the grain when dealing with the threat of plague seeds and implores the use of charms and talismans. Not only does Aphra resort to these measures herself, but “[tries] to frighten” the villagers into “parting with a shilling for a charm to fend the plague away. This causes a controversial reaction amongst villagers. Some, out of sheer desperation contrived to use these “wicked follies” showing segregation amongst the village between those who believed God, and atonement through self-

sacrifice as the answer to the plague, and those who began to steer away from the religious reasoning.

Kate Talbot is an ordinary townswoman, married to a good, strong man, who subdues to superstition. She uses a spell given to her by “ the Ghost of Anys Gowdie,” the late towns herblore specialist. Kate summarises the new non-religious facet of the Eyam society, as she “[does] not, in [her] heart, believe in it, yet [she] bought [a] charm because that which [she] does believe has failed [her.]” As God does not appear to be hearing their prayers, the villagers seek out alternative means to combat the plague, many of which are driven by fear.

Whilst a small section of desperate villagers resort to black magic to cope with the plague, others move in the opposite direction, such as John Gordon, and become devout religious fanatics, in the hope to atone for their sins. This atonement is brought about as the constant reminder through adversity of death forces the villagers to contemplate the afterlife, past sins and God’s ultimate judgment. John Gordon is at the far right end of the scale, becoming flagellant to atone for his sins. Not only does he indulge in self-punishment, John Gordon forces the same upon his wife, “[fasting her] a fortnight. ” Gordon believes that Mompellion “[does] wrong in encouraging people to see the Plague as anything other than God’s wrath made manifest.

He is of the belief that all of the villagers should fear God and should publicly confess “ each and every sin,” indicating not a lust for atonement purely to better oneself, but out of fear of God’s wrath and vengeance against sinners. This same principal can be applied in the case of Jakob Merrill, as he

becomes quite sentimental and dictate to Mompellion his wish to atone for the sins he committed against his wife. The plague and its constant reminder of impending death make Jakob “fear [death,] for he has sinned in [his] life. Much like John Gordon, it is not atonement for the wish to better himself as a person, but as a bid so as “[he] will not be punished for [his sins.]” The facet of society that becomes devout to religion do so out of fear, and are therefore partaking in the same search for ulterior answers as those that use talismans.

Anna Frith is a leading character in taking a scientific approach in response to the plague. She begins to question why everyone, including herself, “seeks to put the Plague in unseen hands. Anna begins to shy away from religion and questioning, “If [the villagers] balanced the time [they] spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted [them,] with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned [their] blood. ” Anna believes that with a basis of solid research instead of simply theorising about religion and the satanic or wrath-like nature of the plague they “might come nearer to saving [their] lives. This signifies Anna moving away from religion and towards nature, science and extended knowledge. The God versus Nature moralistic combat is taken to the next level when Anna begins to question “if [they] could be allowed to see the plague as a thing in Nature merely.

” This presses the issue of what was considered holistic thinking in the ways of the community at the time. Moving away from religion was a bold move for the era as not much was known about the nature of disease, how it spread and how to cure it. When the people don’t have the means to create answers to their questions, they turn to the metaphysical for explanations

and to the “ grand celestial design,” that is the work of God Almighty. Elinor Mompellion, a highly educated, intellectual woman, who is also Anna Frith’s mentor, to no surprise also took this naturalistic approach in utilising herb lore to try and better the villagers. They share a common view in that they should tackle the plague with a systematic and scientific approach.

Elinor begins by creating a “ map of the dwellings...from [which she] believes [they] can grasp how this pestilence spreads, and to whom. ” Elinor Mompellion uses visual mapping to create links between victims and forces the question of how these victims contract the bubonic plague, no longer asking whether they were saints or sinners, but whether the plague takes “ the young over the old. ” She turns away from asking villagers to beg repentance of the saviour and toward “ arm[ing]” those who are still healthy against contracting the disease. This use of basic scientific methods and questioning of the true nature of the plague, demonstrates a push away from metaphysical beliefs into a modern mind of ideals. In times of adversity, such as this of the bubonic plague in Eyam, people become fearful and desperate for answers.

It is this immense weight of being in the dark knowledge-wise that compels people to perform in a way they would not normally do. The nature of a person is revealed in the novel through the way in which they contend with the plague. Three examples of this appear throughout Year of Wonders, two of these metaphysical; superstition and black magic and extreme religious behaviour, such as the flagellant practices. The third example is that of a scientifically minded approach, a very avant-garde theory for the time.

When reviewing the ways in which the characters in Geraldine Brook's Year of Wonders, one common theme can be deduced; that whichever path the characters follow, that through their desperation, they are all simply looking to answer a seemingly impossible puzzle through whatever they themselves believe.