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Document Reaction Paper: A Chronicle of the Black Death by Jean de Venette

Ring around the rosy, pocket full of poesy, ashes, ashes, we all fall down.

This seemingly innocent nursery rhyme that we all sang as little kids is actually a description of one of the most tragic outbreaks in all of history.

This little ditty describes the signs and progress of the black death. Ring around the rosy, the plague first makes an introduction to it's victim by a boil like sore in the groin or the armpit. Pocket full of posy, people would stuff flowers in their pockets and around their necks to keep the stench of their illness to a minimum. Ashes, ashes, the description of what this horrific plague does to one's skin when the deterioration phase begins. We all fall down, death being completely inevitable for someone unlucky enough to be contaminated by this illness. This nursery rhyme is one of the reminders we have today that keeps us in check. It reminds us that we don't have total control, mother nature has a funny way of reminding the human race who has the most power. A french friar named Jean de Venette recorded an amazingly detailed account of the black death. His personal experience seeing the bubonic plague first hand must have been excruciating. France was one of the hardest hits of the Black Death. The breakout occurred during the mid-1300's, a time where famine had recently struck. In addition, wars were still a major issue for Europe. Towns were cramped with poor sanitation. If one person in the house was infected, everyone in the house was infected. This pestilence couldn't have found a more opportune time to take full force on the human race. The origins of this nasty epidemic were fought about for many years, but modern day historians have come to an agreement. The disease was found in fleas who were on rats. These rats

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went from town to town, dropping off the disease and only carrying it to further destruction. Mongolia was the first to claim the outbreak. From there, it spread to Russia and the Black Sea ports. The rats that were carrying the disease lived around the ports, therefore, getting on ships as well. These ships would transfer not only the intended cargo, but also the infected rats to cities all across Europe. Sicily suffered a huge outbreak due to the fact that it was one of the largest trading cities in Europe. From there, the disease was in full contact with humans thanks to the traveling rats. The human contact was just as hazardous, doctors that agreed to treat these patients often died along side the patient or in some cases, before the patient. This infamous outbreak rattled the entire european continent and began what we know as the dark ages. In a time with no scientific insight, panic and chaos flew just as rampantly as the bubonic plague itself. Europe went from inhabiting 72 million people to 42 million people. With a loss rate of 35%, nearly 30 million died from this outbreak. The symptoms of the Black Death are very distinct. Once the infection began, the incubation period lasted from one to six days. Your chances of making it past a week were nearly impossible. Two or three days following the initial symptoms a hard painful swelling, varying in size between an almond and an orange, developed in the lymph nodes closest to the point of infection. This was called the bubo, the most characteristic sign of the bubonic plague. We call it the Black Death because the buboes started a red color, but then eventually turning black, practically rotting the skin. Buboes would appear on the thigh, groin, and armpit. They were extremely painful and spread at an incredible rate. Other symptoms include fever, chill, headache, prostration, anorexia, vomiting, Scott 1 abdominal pain, cough, chest pain, and skin rash. Different locations tended to have slight variations

of the plague. The West was mostly known for the bubo while the East was known for a sudden gush of blood from the nose. The one major symptom of the bubonic plague was how incredibly contagious it was. The disease could not be contained, nor were the houses livable after the epidemic swarmed through. The reactions to the Black Death can be seen in Venette's account of the outbreak. He speaks on the rumors of the origins of the plague, some accusing the Jews of poisoning the water supplies. This became far more than just a rumor, for the entire world attached to this notion and massacred the Jewish people. Christians were even responsible for burning mass amounts of Jews. Now that we look back on these accusations today, we can see that even if the Jewish people had poisoned the water supplies, the consequences of such actions could not have caused such a massive infection to such a large amount of people. While the accusation of the Jewish people was clearly wrong, it still fed the fire than eventually became anti-semitism. Other believed causes for the plague were the wrath of God or demons that were possessing cities at a time. Venette speaks on some of the emotions that ran through this tragic and dark hour in history. If the spouse or child of a household became ill, the remaining family would often abandon their infected family members in fear of their own life. The feel of the society was chaotic and panic ran rampantly through the streets. When your neighbors are alive and well one day, and dead the next, panic is bound to take full effect. People often became superstitious, fearing that this epidemic was from evil spirits that had been aggravated. Christianity actually had a time of good faith during the bubonic plague. It is interesting to see how in the time of desperation, people will cling to anything that resembles a guiding light and a reassuring hope. Along with this notion of hope, there

were a few good things that followed the Black Death. Due to the fact that the Black Death knew no boundaries, both the rich and the poor were mercilessly killed. This brought an end to Feudalism and made the class divisions less severe. One could say it may have helped unify societies as a whole. Another benefactor following the outbreak was the focus people put on the improvement of medicine. The evolution of medicine kicked into gear with the Scientific Revolution right around the corner. The value of life became sacred and the importance of good health and a sustainable society became a number one priority. In comparing our medical evolution from modern day to the mid-1300's, we have come more than a long way. We have gone from curing an illness with treatments such as leaching and bleeding to chemo therapy. It's odd to think about such a thing happening today. Hardly anyone believes that a disease could surpass our medical technology so far as to creating an epidemic again. We see our society touching on the subject with fascinations of zombie apocalypse thrillers and movies such as " I am Legend". While it seems like an impossibility, mother nature could still rear her wrath on us once again. We should be cautious with our egos and keep our medical advances still moving forward. Getting comfortable with our accomplishments would probably be the key to some kind of outbreak. As a society, we should stay on the right track and keep focused on always improving what we've already acquired. By hearing children singing " ring around the rosy, pocket full of poesy, ashes, ashes, we all fall down", we are reminded that there is a force greater than us. As said before, we should keep looking back on history to keep our focus and prevent ourselves from repeating the same mistakes again. Works Cited
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Link: <http://historyguide.org/ancient/lecture29b.html> A Chronicle of the Black Death by Jean de Venette