

Autonomy and the  
physical body:  
defoe's "a journal of  
the plague year" and  
pope's...



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Independence and personal freedom are fundamental values of both entire societies and individual life stories. However, within Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, contrasting physical representations of the body reign wherein characters are stripped of their autonomy. Defoe's text offers its reader insight into the tense atmosphere of disease-infested London. Through vivid depictions of suffering and the outbreak's effect on the physical body, Defoe demonstrates the ways in which the afflicted were not only robbed of their health, but also of their autonomy. Pope, on the other hand, paints a misogynistic portrait of the female body that has been deprived of her independence due to the constraints of seventeenth century gender ideologies.

Published fifty-seven years after the outbreak, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* recounts the events of the Great Plague of London in 1665. The text's vigilant narrator, known only as H. F., chronicles the disease as it spreads across the city. Panicked residents flee from the capital, while courageous public officials, servants and poverty-stricken families remain behind. As the death toll rises, victims are continuously transported to the "pit in the churchyard of our parish of Aldgate" (Defoe, 21).

H. F.'s narration conveys the sound of grief within the cries of English citizens. Furthermore, through intense imagery, he paints a haunting atmospheric portrait of seventeenth century London. Rich in detail and rampant in vivid description, the plague's physical effects on the human body are evident. The text's narrator compares the epidemic to a type of mass hysteria:

“ So they were as mad upon their running after quacks and mountebanks, and every practising old woman, for medicines and remedies; storing themselves with such multitudes of pills, potions, and preservatives, as they were called, that they not only spent their money but even poisoned themselves beforehand for fear of the poison of the infection; and prepared their bodies for the plague, instead of preserving them against it. On the other hand it is incredible and scarce to be imagined, how the posts of houses and corners of streets were plastered over with doctors' bills and papers of ignorant fellows” (Defoe, 11).

H. F. offers his audience a vivid and gruesome depiction of the outbreak's effects on the physical body. By alternating between narrative and eyewitness accounts of the attack, an emotional response is evoked within the reader, as one cannot help but feel affected by the continuous and pervasive examples of despair, pain and grief:

“ The tokens come out upon them; after which they seldom lived six hours; for those spots they called the tokens were really gangrene spots, or mortified flesh in small knobs as broad as a little silver penny, and hard as a piece of callus or horn; so that, when the disease was come up to that length, there was nothing could follow but certain death; and yet, as I said, they knew nothing of their being infected, nor found themselves so much as out of order, till those mortal marks were upon them” (Defoe, 70).

Defoe is able to articulate the harrowing nature of the plague by concentrating on the horrific swellings on the bodies of the afflicted. He illustrates their severity, stating that people frantically tried to burst them by

stabbing or burning them off. The pain was often unbearable and as a result, people shrieked throughout the streets of London. Others threw themselves into burial pits, murdered their children, sank into depression or committed suicide in order to relieve their suffering. Victims of the plague were not only stripped of their autonomy and their sanity, but they were also robbed of their bodies.

Although Defoe's particularly graphic portrayals of the outbreak's effects on the physical body are incredibly disturbing, his work is a testament to the endurance and perseverance of humanity. Therefore, by simultaneously eliciting themes of human distress and human fortitude among the realities of contending with the outbreak, Defoe's morbid depictions of human suffering are justifiable and are furthermore key to exemplifying the epidemic of the seventeenth century.

Contrastingly, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is a satirical indictment of the vanities and idleness of aristocratic society, wherein the narrator undermines the roles of women within seventeenth century. By writing during a time that privileged masculine political and literary expression, Pope confers the tensions - quite literally - onto the female body, which, as a result, becomes a controlled construct. The virtue of beauty and the significance of appearance - both physical and social - pervades Pope's text, as he writes: " If to her share some female errors fall,/ Look on her face, and you'll forget ' em all" (Pope, 17-18). A woman's self-worth and means of social freedom were heavily based upon the fulfillment of a culturally desirable social life. Women spent a great deal of time preparing themselves

for social functions, where gracefulness was much more important than the communication of any intellectual thought.

When describing Belinda's beauty routine, Pope states: "The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,/ Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride" (Pope, 127-128). For women, pride was also obtained through the beautification of the physical body. When Belinda is forced to deal with her sudden hair loss, she experiences a great deal of shame and public humiliation, exclaiming:

"Oh, had I rather unadmired remained/  
In some love isle, or distant northern land.  
. . . There kept my charms concealed from mortal eye,  
/ Like roses that in deserts bloom and die" (Pope, 153-158).

The "rape of the lock" shattered Belinda's means of livelihood. Like many rape victims and women within socialized society, Belinda implies an inferior status by making an attempt to rationalize the incident and blaming herself. The text suggests the notion that Belinda would rather have been raped sexually. This way, she could have suffered private humiliation instead of having a lock of her hair cut off publicly.

Rendering the female body as a "painted vessel" (Pope, 47), Pope uses it as a satirical device that outlines the gender politics that were inseparable from seventeenth century societal stereotypes. By sustaining negative stereotypes and generalizations about the female character, he denies women of their autonomy and attempts to justify the inferiority complex within society's construct of gender ideologies.

Graphic portrayals of the plague in Defoe's *A Journal of The Plague Year* demonstrate the chilling prospect of an infectious disease whose rise revokes the autonomy of its victims, while challenging the resourcefulness of citizens and public officials. Through themes of human distress and perseverance, Defoe's morbid depictions of human suffering are justifiable and are furthermore key to exemplifying London's outbreak in the seventeenth century. However, in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, the one-sided depiction of Belinda and of the loss of her hair makes for an unjustifiable account of the woman and the body. His characterization and satirical telling of the incident paints a very negative picture of women. With little female character development and connotations to their flaws and weaknesses, Pope's text is a great injustice to women.

#### Works Cited:

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