

The greatest threat to  
an individual is the  
ignorance and  
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Though the plague played a large role in the demise of the small town of Eyam in the 17th century in Geraldine Brooks's novel *Year Of Wonders*, the ignorance and misinterpretation of events of the townspeople assisted in their own downfall, especially relating to religion, witchcraft and tradition.

Anys and Mem Gowdie were the town's herbalists and midwives. Born into a time where belief in demons and the wrath of God was rife amongst the villages, the success and skill of the Gowdies was often questioned to be the work of witches, as no human could possibly possess such skills. It was this wariness of the Gowdies that led to their demise. Because education was uncommon, the Gowdies were one step ahead of everyone else, and the unfamiliarity of this caused the villagers to treat the Gowdies with distaste and eventually publically execute Anys Gowdie, injuring Mem Gowdie in the process, which was enough to kill her. This ignorance of the Gowdies practices and willingness to believe in the improbable quickly led the villagers to their own demise, as with only the small knowledge of medicines from Elinor and Anna, the villagers were not able to survive the plague as well as they could have if the Gowdies help was still available.

This fear and ignorance also led the villagers to be tricked out of their money by Aphra, who dressed as the ghost of Anys Gowdie and claimed she had medicinals that could ail their wounds. With money running low, the desperation of these villagers was evident in their ability to go against what their faith dictated and take a risk in the mysterious ghost, so when this leap of faith turned out to be a fallacy, all hope was lost for many of the

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townspeople, which only aided the plagues spreading, as many gave up on their fight for life. The entire village's ignorance of medicinal practices was one of the biggest and hardest threats to overcome, and may have assisted in the devastating effect of the plague on the village Eyam. Religion has a fierce hold over the ignorant townsfolk of Eyam. Many in the town were of the opinion that the bubonic plague was God's way of punishing them, and that even if a cure was available, they should not succumb to the temptation of taking it, as it would be seen as taking a pact with the devil to dabble in medicinals. This was shown in the flagellants John Gordon and Anna's stepmother Aphra. Flagellants believed that humans were innately sinful and needed to be punished, thus the self-whipping that Anna saw from John Gordon, he stopped, every five paces or so, straightened, and raised the scourge to strike himself.

This shows the extent of the town's fear of the wrath of God. They believe that by grievous self-punishment, they can ally God's wrath and hope that, if they've suffered enough, God will allow them to survive. The power of God was also shown in the variety of religions that were followed. The only religion was Christianity, but there were side branches that affected Eyam in the forms of Protestants, puritans and flagellants. Each of these believed the same things, although puritans believed that they should wear drab clothes, so as not to stand out. But each had a fear of God, and His divine wrath, that forced them to attend church each week and pray daily in the hope that He will see them as good. Tradition plays a large role in Eyam.

Being mainly a mining town, it has many traditions that are passed down through the generations. These traditions are mainly in regard to women.

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Women have always been treated as a lower class to men. They are meant to stay at home and take care of the children and the house, while the husbands went out to make a living, and this is evident in the lives of the people of Eyam. This aversion to females and their influence on society affected Eyams survival in many ways. While Mary Hadfield's child was suffering, Mem Gowdies help was offered, but because she was a women, her help was considered second to a male physician, who only ended up spurring along the plagues effects, and the boy was dead by morning. An ignorance of women and education also led to only women being accused of witchcraft, such as the Gowdies.

Their skill was considered unnatural, and because of their gender they were accused as witches, and executed. As a result, this ignorance and arrogance in regard to women and tradition may have helped in the demise of Eyam. It was not only the plague that assisted in the demise of Eyam, but also the entire towns ignorance and fear of the unknown.