

Defoe's a journal of
the plague year: an
examination of the
effects of apocalypti...



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Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* gives the modern reader insight into the tense atmosphere of disease-infested urban London. However, the most important insights we gain from H. F.'s narrative are his observations on human behaviour, ones that can be applied universally to those who become part of the environment of epidemic. In H. F.'s journal, the issues regarding the wrath of God as the ultimate cause of plague, the discussions on plague's means of transmission and treatment, the human desire for an explicable theory to the cause of it, as well as the class consciousness that becomes especially blatant during the plague outbreak of 1665, help to convey Defoe's aim to present this particular visitation of plague in London as a multi-dimensional and complicated circumstance. Hence, the modern reader is less inclined to homogenize and simplify the experiences of plague victims, thereby leaving the narrative with a greater understanding of the tremendous effects of disease on humanity. While examining *A Journal of the Plague Year*, it becomes important to determine how far plague is represented as a divine visitation, or conversely, how much as a natural calamity. At the time of the 1665 plague outbreak, the wrath of God is the prevalent theory for accounting for the initial causation of plague. In fact, December 16, 1720 is declared as a national Day of Repentance, in the hopes that human penitence would counter the effects of plague, thus depicting the strong religious convictions of the English society throughout this time. Defoe's narrator H. F. can represent the religious man of this period. In fact, he carries the Bible with him at all times and opens it to read spontaneous passages whenever he feels a need for external support and guidance. For instance, when H. F. is deliberating over whether to stay or flee London during the 1665 outbreak of plague, he opens the Bible

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randomly to Psalm 91 and finds support for his decision to stay, as he ultimately believes that plague is the “ will of the Heavens” 1. However, we must not mistake Defoe's H. F. as a stock character who blindly accepts the reasons for plague in only religious terms. Rather, H. F. takes great efforts to examine the multi-dimensional nature of the 1665 visitation of plague. For instance, H. F. states that “ Nothing but the immediate Finger of God, nothing but omnipotent Power could have done it” 2. Plague is commonly attributed to the wrath of God. In fact, it is largely believed by the London population at this time that “ even the buboes are the stroke of an angry diety” 3. However, Defoe's H. F. does not unquestioningly accept this explanation without examining other theories. For instance, he accepts that one could also attempt to explain plague through a scientific perspective. That is, plague can be attributed to natural scientific causes. Nevertheless, although H. F. recognizes potential scientific causes of plague, he does make it clear that even these scientific “ natural” causes ultimately have God as their source⁴. H. F.'s ambivalent views on the wrath of God being the authority theory on the cause of the Plague can best be described as “ orthodox rationalism” 5. In essence, although H. F. does give the dominant wrath of God theory as the cause of plague its due recognition, he does not fail to at least acknowledge other sources, thereby giving the reader insight into his deliberative and rational personality, one that makes him a distinct and credible plague narrator. In addition to investigating the causes behind the outbreak of plague in London, it also becomes important to examine the means of its transmission. At this time, the debate over how plague spreads is generally a binary between the miasmatic and the contagion theories.

Today, it is a general consensus that plague is spread by fleas that become
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infected through rodents; however, this information is not made available until nearly a century after the 1665 visitation of the plague in London. The miasmatic view holds the notion that plague is spread through the air, since it purports that the putrid air of a plagued city carries the disease. However, Defoe rejects this miasmatic view in favour of the contagion theory. Defoe's pro-contagion views manifest themselves throughout H. F.'s narrative. He essentially believes that the poison of plague lies in the human being and not in the atmosphere. Hence, H. F.'s outrage at the careless behaviour of commoners during the 1665 visitation of plague, where many people simply paid little or no attention to who or where they kept company, can be sympathized with. In fact, H. F. observes that his opinion and the opinions of physicians coincided, that: the Sick cou'd infect none but those that came within reach of the sick Person...[the Sick] breathed Death in every Place, and upon every Body who came near them; nay their very Cloaths retained the Infection, their Hands would infect the Things they touch'd, especially if they were warm and sweaty" 6. Hence, we can observe H. F.'s strong adherence to the contagion theory. It becomes important to acknowledge the two major views on plague's means of transmission when examining H. F.'s narrative, as it is his strong conviction of the contagion view that lies behind his suggestions for the treatment and prevention of plague. Ironically enough, although H. F. did adamantly believe that plague is spread from human being to human being and not through the uncontainable air, he nonetheless also believes that the force of plague could not be prevented. He offers the reader contradicting views on the two major methods of treatment for plague advocated at these times, which include the shutting up of houses and fleeing from the city. For instance, although he himself

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resolves to stay in the city since he believes that plague is willed by God and is inescapable, he nonetheless advocates the impractical option of mass evacuation from the city in order to flee plague. H. F. states, " tho' Providence seem'd to direct my Conduct to be otherwise; yet it is my opinion...that the best Physick against the Plague is to run away from it" 7. Moreover, although he believes that plague is transmitted from person to person, he nonetheless deems the shutting up of the houses to prevent the spread of plague futile. He states on numerous instances throughout the text that the shutting up of the houses is ineffective and counter-productive, since it could not be effectively enforced. For instance, he describes, " I am speaking now of People made desperate, by the Apprehensions of their being shut up, and their breaking out by Stratagem or Force, either before or after they were shut up, whose Misery was not lessen'd, when they were out, but sadly encreased" 8. Thus, H. F. does not endorse the shutting up of houses as a preventative measure against plague. In essence, Defoe's narrator H. F. conveys justified but opposing views on plague's means of transmission and prevention. Perhaps H. F.'s contradictory nature is symbolic of his pragmatic and deliberative nature, one that does not allow him to accept any concrete path of reasoning in order to perhaps better understand an incomprehensible epidemic. One of the most significant representations of plague that H. F. gives his audience is the hunger for meaning prevalent in his disease-ridden environment. We are given evidence in H. F.'s narrative of the human need for visualizing the force of plague in the hopes to extract some type of profound meaning from the epidemic. For instance, H. F. recounts how before the 1665 visitation of plague even really began, he finds:...a crowd of people in the Street all staring up into the Air, to see what

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a Woman told them appeared plain to her, which was an Angel cloth'd in white, with a fiery Sword in his Hand, waving it, or brandishing it over his Head. She described every Part of the Figure to the Life; shew'd them the Motion, and the Form; and the poor People cam into it so eagerly, and with so much Readiness; YES, I see it all plainly, says one. There's the Sword as plain as can be. Another saw the Angel. One saw his very Face, and cry'd out, What a glorious Creature he was! One saw one thing, and one another⁹. It is important to examine this crucial passage in H. F.'s narrative as it allows the reader to gain insight into the emergence of quackery and corruption during an already dismal period. H. F. gives proof of the many people who are prepared to take economic advantage of those who became more vulnerable during the time of plague. For instance, literary critic Natasha Rosow describes: Posts were plastered with fraudulent advertisements for "infallible" preventative pills, "never failing" preservatives and "the Royalantidote." A few physicians were also overcome by greed: "I give my advice to the poor for nothing, but not my physic (medicine) 10. We can observe how in general, the atmosphere during plague was one of fear of the unknown, where victims of this fear were easily manipulated. Hence, the inexplicable nature of plague creates an enigmatic atmosphere, thereby invoking a hunger for meaning within the people affected, as is demonstrated by the congregation gathered in the street striving to extract meaning from an imperceptible image. The issues of class discrimination arising in Defoe's plague narrative are undoubtedly significant. Although the precise reasons for the cause and spread of plague were not unanimously agreed upon during the context of the narrative, it is however "generally agreed through experience that filthy, stinking, and overcrowded

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environments were particularly attractive to the infection and that plague was more prevalent among the dirty poor” 11. Of course, the belief that there were more frequent occurrences of plague in the less wealthy classes most certainly led to class divisions and therefore a further solidification of an existing class hierarchy. Hence, H. F. dedicates a considerable part of his narrative to sympathizing with the specific plight of the poorer people during the 1665 visitation of plague. Margaret Healy explains in her article “ Defoe’s Journal and the English Writing Tradition,” that while H. F. chastises the “ useless mouths for their lack of foresight, poor husbandry, and extravagance, he simultaneously evinces admiration for their courage and dignity” 12. For example, H. F. includes a story about three men who escape plague by fleeing to the countryside. H. F. commends their ingenuity and religious conviction by stating that their plan is “ a very good Pattern for any poor Man to follow” 13. Thus, it is evident that H. F. feels a great deal of sympathy and responsibility for the poor as they are most afflicted by the effects of plague. In fact, Defoe proposes in this narrative a mass evacuation from London in order to save the poor during plague. Although this highly impractical suggestion is not enacted, we can nevertheless observe his concern for the poor. He gives us a further example of how the poor suffered the most when he describes how watchmen could be bribed. He states: As several People, I say, got out of their Houses by Stratagem, after they were shut up, so others got out by bribing the Watchmen... I must confess, I thought it at the time, the most innocent Corruption, or Bribery, that any Man could be guilty of; and therefore could not but pity the poor Men¹⁴. Furthermore, according to Healy, Defoe believes that “ it was public charity, not city credit, that saved the poor and maintained London order in 1665” <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-a-journal-of-the-plague-year-an-examination-of-the-effects-of-apocalyptic-disease-on-humanity/>

15. Ultimately, Defoe emphasizes salvation for the poor as it is inevitably linked with the salvation of plague-infested London as a whole. In conclusion, the issues of providence, causes, treatment methods, a desire for meaning and class consciousness that arise when studying H. F.'s interpretations of plague have applications beyond simply the major visitation of 1665 in London. Instead, Daniel Defoe's text examines the transference of economic tensions among the aristocracy, the middle class and the poor into moral discourse. H. F.'s views and observations of plague infested London shed light on our own modern-day afflictions with epidemics such as the AIDS spread. Contemporary physician Laurence Segel questions, " Can we truthfully say we have never fled, abandoned or ostracized the afflicted?" 16.

Ultimately, the following statement from Albert Camus' *The Plague* rings true: " I know positively that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth, is free from it" 17. Endnotes¹ Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. 2 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 244-45. 3 Margaret Healy. " Defoe's Journal and the English Plague Writing Tradition." *Literature and Medicine* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003) 25-44. Copyright by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Page 28. 4 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page xxiii (introduction). 5 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page xxiii (introduction). 6 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page xxviii (introduction). 7 Daniel <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-a-journal-of-the-plague-year-an-examination-of-the-effects-of-apocalyptic-disease-on-humanity/>

Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page xviii (introduction). 8 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 55. 9 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 22-23. 10 Natasha Rosow. "Constructing Authenticity." *Studies in the Novel*, Volume 30, number 2 (Summer, 1998). Copyright 1998 by the University of Northern Texas. Page 2. 11 Margaret Healy. "Defoe's Journal and the English Plague Writing Tradition." *Literature and Medicine* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003) 25-44. Copyright by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Page 34. 12 Margaret Healy. "Defoe's Journal and the English Plague Writing Tradition." *Literature and Medicine* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003) 25-44. Copyright by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Page 37. 13 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 58. 14 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 57. 15 Daniel Defoe. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Page 37. 16 Laurence Segel—physician and assistant vice-president medical research and development, with a Toronto financial firm. Copyright 1997 Maclean Hunter Ltd. November 20, 2003. 17 Albert Camus. *The Plague*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948. Bibliography Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Trans. Stuart Gilbert. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948. Defoe, Daniel. *Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited with an Introduction by Louis Landa. Oxford University Press: London, 1969. Healy, Margaret. "Defoe's Journal and the <https://assignbuster.com/defoes-a-journal-of-the-plague-year-an-examination-of-the-effects-of-apocalyptic-disease-on-humanity/>

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