

Introduction

Journal of a Plague Year, is a pretty straightforward book. However, there are some topics that seem to be up for discussion. In the book, the main character discusses the different class structures, the methods that the doctors tried, and the way that the people acted during this time. In my essay, I will be discussing how I think that the book should have went into more detail on the big controversies that the plague created, and how people dealt with the sudden approach of the plague.

During that time period, there were strict class structures. People were divided based on money and/or social status. I don't think that was right, but they saw that as normal back then. They thought that people with money were too good for the people without it.

The upper class seemed to see the lower class as disgusting people, who would never be on their level. The richer families stuck together, and put as much distance between themselves and the poor. When the plague hit, they got what they wanted.

The upper class were able to use their resources to "escape" the plague. Unlike them, the lower class had to stay and fight the plague. They had to be the ones that found out what worked and what didn't. They were the ones that stuck around till the end. They had to be the guinea pigs, and test the medicines, and methods that the doctors came up with. They had to go through all of the deaths, and seeing friends and family suffering.

The members of the upper class were able to use all of their money, and ties to rich families, to get on ships, and sail away from the Black Death. The only problem with that would have been the sick that could have been on board with them, not even knowing that they were infected until it was too late.

I think that was a way of karma working its magic. I believe that the people that were too scared to fight it, or even help the infected, were cowards, and maybe they should have been the ones that were infected.

However, the lower class, pulled through, with less numbers than they had before the plague, but they still stuck it out, and “survived” in a sense. They can be the ones that can say that they pushed through the infamous “Black Death”.

Without the lower class, we might not have found a cure, or the plague might still be the thing that kills about half of the population. We could still be finding a solution, or running away from the plague. The lower class could have been us, just without the title.

The doctors during this time period relied heavily on the lower class, and used them to find out what worked and what didn't; they used them to help others. I know that this is a little extreme, but without the lower class being the test subjects, we might still be battling the plague to this day.

If the lower class people were able to “escape” the plague, would we ever know the solution to the plague if it came around again today? Would we be able to run away from it, or would we be infected? I hope it is safe to say that we have the resources now, to face it head on, and eliminate the threat if it ever came back around.

Doctors, during that time period, deserve more credit than they received. They were the ones that had to risk their own lives to find a cure to help the infected. They were the ones that put in all of that hard work to ensure that if the plague came back around, that we would be ready. Without the doctors, we would still be battling the ferocious plague.

The plague was a tough time for everyone; even the upper class struggled during the plague. The

only thing that the two class structures had in common, was the fear that they had. Even the upper class was scared of the plague.

They were scared of being infected, just like the lower class; they had every right to be. I just think that it is funny, how they run away from it, but still fear it. They use all of their money, and still have to battle the inevitable.

I think that the biggest factor that played in the spread of the plague, was the health, and living conditions of the people. People back then weren't the cleanest. They had trashy, and unsanitary ways of living, and this just help the plague spread faster and faster. Since people lived so close to one another, they had an increased chance of getting on another sick.

People lived in such "close quarters", so the plague took advantage of that, and spread even faster. Also, the people had no real source of sanitation. When you are sick, the first thing that you want to do, is sanitize everything, to reduce the chance of the infection spreading. Unlike now, they didn't have the knowledge that we have now. They didn't have lysol, or hand sanitizer, to prevent the spread of the plague.

We were able to learn from this crisis, and can now properly deal with the spread of illnesses, and infections. We now know that we need to be cleaner, and our living conditions need to be more structured. We also learned that doctors will learn, and need to change with the times.

Doctors during that time, were under a lot of pressure, and they didn't really have a lot of answers for the infected.

Also, the church seemed to receive the blunt end of the stick, when it comes to blame. The people thought that the church would save them from the plague, and cure the sick. The people looked toward the church for help, and they were upset when they didn't get what they wanted.

It is understandable for the people to look for someone, or something to blame. They didn't know what was happening, or how to fix it. They didn't know what to do to help, so they looked to the church for help, and when the church couldn't help, that's where they pinned the blame. As you can see, *Journal of a Plague Year* contains a lot of controversy. There are little things that stand out in the book, that should probably be addressed. There are way more topics that should be discussed, other than the ones that I brought up.

Honestly I think that the little things that have strong backstories, make the book better. They make the book, not necessarily relatable, but agreeable. If someone reading the book thinks that one of the topics means a certain thing, then they can believe that.

This book doesn't really take a side. It covers both sides, and can cover many different views, without holding one view point. I think that this book has an opinion, but doesn't really express it.

Since the book doesn't pick a side, it helps people who read it, not judge the author, for picking the side they did. It helps the reader think that their side is right, and there is no other side. The only problem with this, is that then, the author's work might be used in the wrong sense, or used for something that it was never meant for.

However, I think that the author chose the right path, and left opinions out. *Journal of a Plague Year* just told a story, and didn't bring in any outside opinions in. It also withheld bringing up topics that didn't relate to the story. The author left the story as original as he could, with changing as he saw fit. *Journal of a Plague Year* was a very successful story, and did a great job of describing our history, and shows how far the world has evolved for the better.

Lit Review

Scientist Doing History: Central Africa and the Origins of the First Plague Pandemic

Journal of a plague year can be a controversial topic, but many think that it is pretty straight forward. George D. Sussman talks about where the plagues came from. Many people think that the plague comes from the rats on the ships, but Sussman thinks that there is way more behind it. He thinks that since there were more than one plague, that there are multiple sources. It makes sense, but could he be overthinking it?

Sussman believes, “that the first plague pandemic was probably imported to the Red Sea from Indian Ocean port farther east, while plague did not reach the Great Lakes region until the early nineteenth century in bundles of Indian cloth carried from coastal Zanzibar by Arab traders.”

(Sussman, p.326) He goes against the accepted belief that the plague “originated not in the east, but in the south, in the isolated Great Lakes region of Central Africa.” (Sussman, p. 326)

I understand that scientist want to know where it came from, and how it happened, to prevent it from happening again, but why is it so important to the book. Why would people focus on the origin of the plague, if there are so many more things that are worth investigating. People could focus on the people that got sick, and how they dealt with that, or how people felt about the church during the time. There are just so many other factors that make up the book, and the situation itself.

The Initial Years of the Third Bubonic Plague Pandemic, 1894-1901

Myron Echenberg focuses on “the third and most recent plague pandemic, which ran from 1894 to roughly 1950.” (Echenberg, p. 430-431) He looks at more of what the plague did to people, and what people thought of the plague after it hit. He describes the plague’s motion as,

“Emerging from its wild rodent reservoir in the Himalayan borderlands between China and India

soon after 1855, and traveling this time not west but east, bubonic plague infected the densely populated provinces of south China before attacking Guangzhou (Canton) and then the British colonial port of Hong Kong in 1894. There it rekindled international fears, especially when it reached Macao and Fuzhou a year later, and struck Singapore and Bombay in 1896. Transported rapidly by British steamships throughout the empire and beyond, bubonic plague took only a few years to reach every continent.” (Echenberg, p. 431)

I think that this is how everyone would describe the plague. Most people see the plague as an evil figure, or event. I don't understand why people would classify the plague as “human catastrophes,” (Echenberg, p. 429) or “political and social breakdown.” (Echenberg, p. 429) I would classify the plague as a disease, or a natural disaster.

Defoe and the Contagion of the Oral: Modeling Media Shift in “A Journal of a Plague Year”

Paula McDowell Focuses more on the economic change that occurred during the plague.

McDowell noticed that the doctors were making written reports of the infected, and the dead. She also stated that “Over this period, Defoe suggests, England has become more modern.

Specifically, the reading public has become less vulnerably dependent on oral reports.”

(McDowell, p. 88)

Since England is evolving, I think that this is a good thing, and goes overlooked quite often. I didn't even know about this until I read this article. In the article they talk about how the doctors work during the plague, and how they changed the way we document information, and why we do it.

“When a rumor of the plague's arrival reaches the secretaries of state, they appoint ‘two Physicians and a Surgeon’ to visit the house suspected to harbor the infection. These gentlemen

inspect 'the bodies that were dead,' then orally deliver their 'opinions' concerning cause of death to the parish clerk, who writes them down." (McDowell, p. 88)

As you can see, the plague increased the knowledge of the ones that were left. The ones that weren't infected, had to step up, and help the sick. They had to keep up with what was going on. Someone had to document what was happening to the people, and keep records of what they have tried, and what they think might help the sick. It sucks that such a bad thing had to happen, for people to step up, and modernize England, but at least it happened, so that we know what we know now. I also think that people that came up with documenting this information should get more recognition than they do.

Intimacy, Survival, and Resistance: Daniel Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year

Peter Degabriele wrote about how Daniel Defoe sees things. He talks about how, "Both Maximilian Novak and Carol Kay agree that 'in Defoe's state of nature, humankind is fearful and weak.'" (Degabriele, p.1) Degabriele focused more on comparing Defoe and Hobbes. He also focuses on the way Defoe comes across as, in the description of Journal of the Plague Year. "A Journal of the Plague Year, in its description of the breakdown and rebuilding of civil society, gives us a much clearer notion of the irresolvable tension between the state of nature and the modern social world in Defoe." (Degabriele, p. 1)

Degabriel stated, "A consideration of A Journal will show that it is important not to treat Defoe as a novelist who represents protagonists struggling to survive in the state of nature, but as one who represents the persistence and survival of the state of nature in even the most structured civil societies." (Degabriele, p. 1)

I agree with this statement because, while reading A Journal of the Plague Year, I noticed how

the character, H.R, acts. He comes off very snobby, and adamant, that he is superior, and everyone else is below him. This shows that he is persistent, and that he is sure that he will survive. I think that his traits can be interpreted in many different ways, depending on the reader's personal beliefs. To me, he seems full of himself, and is trying to avoid the fact that the sickness is taking over.

Spectral Currencies in the Air of Reality: A Journal of the Plague Year and the History of Apparitions

Jayne Lewis focuses more on Daniel Defoe, and the little hidden qualities, instead of the Journal as a whole. Lewis picks out a quality, and says, "if it can be said that his protagonists are haunted by anything, this usually turns out to be some figment of alienated conscience." (Lewis, p. 82) I can relate where Lewis is coming from, and agree. I think that any book has some type of figments, or something that they might focus on more, to make the story better.

One statement that stood out to me from Lewis's piece, was "whether or not the Journal itself counts as history: Do the graphics tokens that compose it add up to fact or fiction." I like that someone called the Journal out, and questioned it. I too wonder if the Journal would be classified as fact or fiction. In a sense, it is facts, but it also has some additional information, and beliefs in there, added my Defoe.

I think that more people should question journals, and books more often. Many stories go overlooked, or just read, and not discussed. I think that a story should be good enough, that people would want to talk about it, or ask questions, to better understand what they just read. People shouldn't want to just read it to get it over with, they should find pleasure in reading the book, and find something that they want to look into further.

Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year Topography and Intentions

Manuel Schonhorn started his journal with two really strong sentence. "Until very recently Daniel Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year received little commendable scholarly attention. Critics felt disposed to argue single-mindedly either the Journal's absolute faithfulness to the historical record or its inventiveness; and in so doing concluded by minimizing its artistry or its reliability." (Schonhorn, p. 387) I think that these two sentences set the tone of Schonhorn's piece.

It is hard to determine what facts are gotten from H.R., or facts that were thrown in by Defoe. Schonhorn summed up that by saying, "His modifications of his sources, and the implications of his tonal variations, have never been fully understood." (Schonhorn, p.388)

Again, I think that Journal of the Plague Year is almost impossible to be classified, as either fact or fiction, because no one can really prove the information that is in the Journal, as fact, or not. I think that people should look at the book as a whole, and not be picky about what classification of the Journal is. The Journal can be its own genre entirely.

Defoe's intention was to write about something tragic that happened. He wrote about something that changed the world, without even trying. The plague was not a person with instructions to kill a majority of the population. The plague was just a disaster that happened, and the people that were affected, had no say in the matter. The people didn't get to decide whether or not they were going to be infected. It just happened. Journal of the Plague Year is a great story, and has an interesting point of view.

History of the Plague

Ingrid Wiechmann talks about the origin of the plague, and how it started. Wiechmann covers

just about everything when it comes to the plague, how it came up, and how it was spread, all in her first couple of sentences. “The infectious disease known as the Plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, a gram-negative, facultative anaerobic, rod-shaped bacterium belonging to the Enterobacteriaceae family. It is a zoonosis found chiefly in feral rodents, spread in the main by infected fleas. Plague epidemics in human populations can, however, occur when the *Yersinia pestis* pathogen invades rat populations that live in close proximity to humans. Once the rats have been largely killed off by the disease, the infected fleas move to the human hosts.” (Wiechmann, p. 65)

Wiechmann did a good job briefly explaining the plague, and how it came about. Wiechmann covered all of the points on the plague, in only like four sentences. Of course that isn't “all” of the information on the plague, but it is pretty close. It is the minimum information that people need to have, to fully understand *Journal of the Plague Year*. It gives the reader a little bit of background, before just diving into it.

A Plague of Plagues: The Problem of Plague Diagnosis in Medieval England

Theilmann and Cate discuss the problems of the diagnosis in medieval England was. It was hard to determine what was killing the people. Most of the deaths were caused by the plague, but were they all caused by the plague? A good chunk of the deaths could have been from the poor living conditions that the people were living in. Some could have been murders. Some could have been old age. Some could just have been from people getting sick. Big pandemics like the plague, have so many sides, and little pieces of information, that could change the result. I think that something that happened that long ago, needs to just be remembered, but not dwelled on.

Body

The plague, or Black Death, was known by the mass death it caused. It was known from all of the families it killed. It was known for causing mass panic in earlier times. It also made people realize how they were living, and what they can do to improve their overall wellbeing, and how that kick starts a revolution, and many more after that.

The upper class during the time period of the plague, were highly worshiped people. They were the highest class, and were respected by others in their class. However, the lower classes didn't really like the upper class. The upper class seemed to demand worship from the lower class, this created tension between the two classes.

It is understandable, that they didn't get along, because of their differences in wealth, and resources. The lower class might be viewed as jealous of the upper class, which they probably were, but they are just different people, and they just have to live the different lifestyles that they were born or forced into.

The upper class people didn't really like the lower class, because they weren't as rich as they were, or didn't look like them. The upper class had elegant robes, and expensive clothes. The lower class barely had enough clothes to cover their body. The upper class had the money to make clothes that were appropriate for every occasion.

What doesn't make sense, is the upper class had enough money to make extra clothes, to give to the poor. It doesn't have to be as extravagant as the clothes the upper class wears, but at least it is something. Anything that the upper class could give to the lower class, would be a step in the right direction. Whatever the upper class would help the health, and wellbeing of the lower class.

The lower class rarely had shoes on their feet, or clothes on their backs.

The upper class have so many clothes, that they shouldn't mind giving a few away. They don't wear them once they don't meet their standards anyway. If they improved the appearance of the lower class, maybe the upper class wouldn't mind being seen in public with them. Maybe they wouldn't be embarrassed of the way that the lower classes looked.

Also, the lower class usually didn't have a place to live, or a home. They had to live in the streets, or lived in a packed house with a couple other families. It is not the ideal living conditions, but they have to get by. This would eventually play a part in why the lower class were so easily infected by the plague.

The upper class had the mansion-like houses, and the resources for everyone to have their own rooms, and then some. They had the huge dining rooms, and the rooms where they would talk about treaties, and foreign affairs. They also had all of the rooms for the people that lived there, they also had a few extras just in case.

Another thing that the upper class had that the lower class didn't, would be food. The lower class rarely had enough food to feed the families once a day. Most of the times, the middle age people would sacrifice their portions and give them to the kids, or the elderly.

They knew that they needed it more than the healthy did. They shouldn't have to do that, when the upper class were sitting in their expensive homes with their expensive lifestyle. It is the common sacrifices that parents would make, without hesitation, for their kids.

The most common thing that they would eat, was bread. Bread was the most filling thing that was common, and kinda cheap. They would also eat fruits and veggies that they could find.

Honestly they would take anything they could get.

The only bad thing about only eating bread all the time, is that they were missing key nutrients

that you need to live. They didn't have protein from meats, and they didn't have the good source of vitamins that are in milk. It makes them more susceptible to getting sick, and makes the plague easier to spread. Since majority of the lower class were all susceptible to getting the infection, there was nothing slowing it down. It ate through the lower class like it was candy. This all could have been prevented, with proper health, and nutrition.

The upper class had plenty of food, and they didn't think of sharing with the lower class. They would give their extra food to their animals, instead of the poor. It was like they were trying to kill of the lower class. They were going out of their way to make it miserable for the lower class. It wasn't fair.

The upper class had pretty much every type of food, and source of nutrition. They were almost never struggling. They would have at least two meals a day, and have extra. They had the resources to give food to the poor, but didn't. They didn't want to help the lower class in any way. They thought that they were so much better than the lower class, but the lower class knew what it wa like, to actually care for someone.

The lower class also didn't have a sense of cleanliness. They would just eat anything, no matter if it was dirty, rotten, or not. This might be the reason that the plague, and other illnesses broke out, and were concentrated on the lower class. The upper class could have prevented this, by helping the lower class live better, and cleaner lives.

The streets that the lower class lived on, were filthy, and really unhealthy, but they didn't have anywhere else to go. Many of the streets were filled with feces, and waste that just builds up over time. They didn't have the resources that the upper class had, so they just made do with what they had, and tried to survive.

Most of the streets were infested with rats, and sewage. In today's society, those streets would be a rare sight. We wouldn't let the streets get that bad. However, we have resources now that they didn't have back then. Today, we have street sweepers, and people also rarely live in the streets, to make that much waste, and litter.

The upper class could have made houses, or just renovated the houses that the lower class had. They could have also just used their resources to help clean the streets that the lower class people were living on. They could have just done something, anything, to help the lower class, instead of complaining about them.

The main reason that the majority of the lower class were infected, might have been because of their living conditions, and their nutrition. The upper class wasn't really infected, because they lived "luxurious", and "clean" lives.

They had the houses, and food that the lower class didn't. They had the hot, freshly cooked meals, that the lower class didn't. They had the warm, and clean homes that the lower class didn't. Since the plague came from the rats and fleas, the lower class people that slept in poor living conditions, were affected.

The upper class were kinda "shut-off" from the plague. Since they have been avoiding the lower class before the plague, they were kinda used to it. It was common for the upper class to not go anywhere near the lower class, and "avoid them like the plague".

While the lower class was battling the plague, and trying to help one another, without getting sick, the upper class members were not doing a single thing to help. During this time, the upper class fled, and got as far away from the infected as possible. They wanted nothing to do with the plague.

They thought that if they avoid the lower class, they would be avoiding the plague. As most know, they were wrong. The plague was everywhere. The plague was “in the air”. You could try and avoid it, but if it wanted to get you, it would. It was like trying to run away from “death” itself. It isn’t going to happen.

Since the plague was infecting mainly the lower class, but still infecting some of the upper class, the members of the upper class used their resources to help their own. They wanted to help other members of the upper class that were infected, but they didn’t want to help the lower class per say.

The upper class ended up locking away their friends and family that were infected, and basically letting them die. They didn’t know what was going on with the sick, or how to help them, so they would just help them die peacefully. I know that sounds really bad, but they were just doing what they could, to get rid of the infection.

The doctors tried to find a cure the infected, but they weren’t finding much. They didn’t really have any clue as to what was going on with the infected. They had no idea what would help them, or what would make it worse. It was a big test run for the doctors. They didn’t have the resources that the doctors have now. It was all just a big guessing game at this point.

Doctors during the plague tried a numerous amounts of theories, and methods for curing the plague. The main one that the doctors tried, was leeching. Leeching was common back then, and would basically be explained by using leeches to “suck out” the infection. The doctors thought that this was working, but it was not.

Leeching was thought to help the sick, because the doctors thought that illnesses came from an excess amount of blood. Leeches were also commonly used to treat numerous other diseases that

were common back then. It was the safest, cheapest, and common way to treat people back then.

Doctors didn't have the antibiotics, and prescriptions that we have now. Also, the doctors, just like everyone else during this period, seemed to not know about sanitation. They would treat patients with a "tool", and didn't really think that it was necessary to "sanitize" the "tool". The people that might have been treated for a cut on the leg would end up losing the leg about a month later, due to infection. This was also a common thing in the war times, and eventually evolved for the better.

Another thing that might stand out about the doctors during the plague, would be the strange masks that they wore. They wore pointy, beak-like masks that were filled with herbs that were supposed to protect them from getting the plague from the people that they helped. They took as many precautions as they could, in order to not get infected. If they got infected, then that would be less of a chance to help cure the other people that were infected.

There are many things that the doctors tried back then, but the only thing that seemed to work during that time period, was secluding the infected, from the healthy. The upper class was very familiar with this, and did it often. The lower class, however, tried to help one another, and ended up getting each other sick.

Even though they tried to divide the sick and the healthy, it wasn't really successful, because of their living conditions. Since the lower class lived so close together, and they didn't really have any way of keeping things sanitized, the infection spread fast. There were not many people that didn't get infected, and those that weren't infected, were devastated, because of the loss of loved ones.

If the upper class had helped the lower class improve their living conditions. I think that the

plague created a crack in the class structures. Class structures started to deteriorate more and more, at time went on. People eventually started to see each other as equals, and started to get along together.

There is one factor in the plague that no one really liked to talk about, and that would be the church. People during this time period had a strong connection with the church. The people would look to the church for answers, or just ask for help whenever they needed it. Well the people turned to the church during this devastating and confusing time, and when the church couldn't provide answers, the people were shocked, and confused.

So just like any human beings, they had to blame someone, or something for what was happening to them. To the people, the church looked like a pretty good target. Many of the people started saying that the church was withholding information, and refusing to help the people. Many know that this wasn't true, but the people didn't know any better. They just needed to make themselves feel better, and give themselves somewhat of an explanation.

It didn't really matter if you were in the upper, or lower class, they seemed to blame the church the same. Neither class really had answers, and they were both being infected. The upper class may not have had as many people being infected, but the ones that were, looked for someone to blame. They also seemed to be closer to the church, and the pope, because of how influential the church was on the people.

The lower class was in the same boat. Although, they seemed to be the target of the infection, they were just as confused as the upper class. Being the targets, made them want answers, and when they didn't get them, this made them angry, and searched for someone to blame. The people thought that whatever was happening, was happening because of God.

They thought that since God was doing this, that the church would have answers on how to overcome it. When the church couldn't help the people, and had no idea what was happening, the people thought that the church was withholding information from them.

As you can see, there were many conflicts that started because of the plague. There were also many underlying conflicts that rose with the plague. The big conflicts with the upper and lower classes were under a lot of stress, because of the plague.

The doctors were under a lot of pressure during this time, to find a cure for the infected, and try and find a way to prevent the plague. The church was also under a lot of stress during this time, to help find an answer for the people, on why the plague was happening. Since everybody's emotions were high, and people were panicking, there was a lot of stress, overall, during this time period.

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