

The Interpretation and Meaning of the Plague: Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*

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Abstract: As an exceptional disaster, the plague creates biological and cultural misunderstanding because of its cultural, natural and social connotations, invisible connotations, tendency to give rise to subjective constructions and contribute to secondary disasters. This article investigates Defoe's account of the plague in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a magnum opus of the plague literature, and discusses how it influenced individual and social interpretation of the plague. It shows how the author's interpretation embodied his own perspective and general aspects of the era, and the 'appearance', 'record' and 'saving' of the plague. It also retrospectively considers their behavioral yardstick and thought criterion, discusses the origin and mechanism of the negative metaphors in the plague, assesses the self-construction of those confronted by diseases and anxiety, reflects on the plague, and writes a super-personal and pan-historical spiritual meaning. This enlightens the present by providing insight into the disasters that mankind once confronted and survived.

Keywords: Cultural Mapping, Meaning Construction, Plague, Secondary Disaster

1. Introduction

Henry E Siegrist remarked in *Civilization and Disease* that disease is as old as life itself, and also noted they simultaneously appeared on Earth. We are all part of nature, and will never be able to completely escape disease. While bacteria and viruses cannot be seen, they are a kind of real material existence. Their impact and harm are not limited to the mode of transmission, as defined by natural laws. The close connection and mutual penetration of human society and the natural environment has become an unexpected influence on the development of society and history.

Mankind's understanding of the plague has developed over a long period of time. While different groups have pursued a unified scientific explanation, they have ultimately been predisposed to understand it as a multi-dimensional social construction. In more typical natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods, death is close and can affect a person's destiny in an instant, and humans are left to their own devices. Normal conventions and standards will be put on hold and ethnic tensions will subside. The effects of the plague are however slower, more insidious and longer lasting. It becomes slowly embedded, bringing uncleanness and disorder to everyday experiences and associations.

The complicated mechanism of disease transmission also makes the man-made problems general and obscure. Plague takes on the function of a polysemic symbol, and therefore assumes a significance that extends beyond its biological nature. In this form, it invokes evil and dereliction of duty. But it also becomes uncertain and subjective, and is part of a realm of chaos.

This metaphorical thought influences popular understanding of the history of plague, as shown in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Camus's *Plague* and Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. This article mainly focuses on Defoe's contribution, which engages 17th century London in the time of the 'Black Plague'. In interpreting the origin of Defoe's work and the process of its development, we refer to his interpretation of the individual and times, and his unique writing on themes of disaster. This enables us to understand and explain the plague in the sense of survival. And it also provides insight into contemporary survival and resistance in the face of various disasters.

2. In Appearance: The Metaphor and Projection of the Plague

At the end of 1664, a plague broke out in London and developed over the next two years, resulting in more than 80,000 deaths, or one-fifth of London's population at the time. It was later identified as a

lymphoid plague, and was known as the "Black Death" because of its high mortality rate and terrible symptoms.

The young Defoe experienced this firsthand. Many years later, he wrote *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which was based on various documents he had collected. In comparison to other texts on the subject, it has a purpose and direction, and also enables the description and interpretation of disaster. We propose to explore the author's narrative strategies and ethical thought and trace his behavioral and ideological standards. And we anticipate this will enable us to uncover the complex social relations, cultural values and belief systems that underpin his thought and work.

A Journal of the Plague Year was not Defoe's first work on the plague, as it was preceded by *Due Preparation for the Plague*, which was published earlier in the same year. It did not engage in extensive storytelling, and its main purpose was to preach religious morality.

Defoe also provides an insight into his intention when he recalls the disaster. *A Journal of the Plague Year* has a very realistic narrative style that differs from most other novels. He shows an extraordinary persistence when reporting various signs of disaster, including closed doors and windows, deserted and desolate streets, the growing of grass inside money exchange, trucks full of corpses moving slowly in the dark, funeral crowds chanting prayers in the dim light of the torch and a silence only broken by desperate mourning howls.

Defoe's interpretation of the meaning of the plague is based on the narrative method. His use of Realism, construction of accurate and reliable representations of time and space, in addition to his use of language to shape the real world, enables him to produce a unique ontology that expresses his intention and position in an eschatological tone. Natural disasters that exist independently of the text therefore serve a certain purpose.

Defoe, in adopting the tone of a narrator, presents the plague as a stroke from Heaven on a city, country or nation. It is a message of God's vengeance, and humiliates with the aim of achieving repentance (*Journal* 231). The author's ideas most clearly take form when he describes a parish burial pit. In one of the most terrible developments, the parish of Aldgate was repeatedly forced to deepen and widen the pits, until a dreadful gulph was formed that consumed the countless bodies. Defoe describes this terrible and tragic scene as "an instructing sight" that will be like a sermon, "the best that ever you heard in your [l]ife" (104).

Susan Sontag's 'The Metaphor of Illness' observes that illness was viewed as a punishment that was inflicted, not just endured. It was a collective calamity and judgement on a community (Sontag 45). In every plague epidemic throughout history, this plague theism has consistently reoccurred. It attributes plague to human sin and regards suffering as a kind of justice.

The novel developed against the backdrop of the Enlightenment, which opened up a new way of seeing and understanding the world and promoted independent thought. The Enlightenment is closely associated with the values of the modern West. It included Locke's Theory of Human Understanding and Newton's mechanical system, which established the spirit of experimental science. In 'Essay on Man', Alexander Pope wrote "know, then, thyself, presume not God to scan; the proper study of mankind is man". This spirit of open enquiry clearly contrasted with the superstition, prejudice that was recorded in *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

The journal listed the strange phenomena in London. Robbery, murder and the confession of long concealed crimes. The penitent now at the end of his life warned others to repent early. While walking on the street, people roared, cried, prayed and begged God for mercy. Many consciences were awakened, hard hearts melted into tears and the people showed an extraordinary zeal in religious exercises. On one side, the streets were empty and lonely, while on the other the churches were crowded with worshippers. The government sought to encourage prayer by formulating public prayers and fasting time. People invested all their hopes of salvation in God. There were all kinds of rumors and diseases about the cause and progress of the plague, and people indulged in prophecy, astrology, divination, and all kinds of "nonsense"; endless stream of swindlers, magicians, astrologers, wisdom stars and prophets took the opportunity to defraud the poor and the sick.

The predicament of medicine aroused a sense of crisis and anxiety and the principles of witchcraft seemed to be more convincing than medical epidemic prevention. Stuart Vyse believes superstitions are correlated with a number of negative experiences, such as anxiety, depression and fear of death. They can affect thought and behavior over a long period of time because they produce some psychological benefit, and most frequently manifest in uncontrollable circumstances, such as an effort to exert greater

control(Vyse 212-213).When seemingly absurd remarks easily gain attention and recognition in public opinion, they contain a special kind of rationality. Indeed, when examined from the perspective of self-protection and survival, they instead appear as a unique protection mechanism. Our understanding must therefore eventually return to the individual's psychological process.

Nietzsche observes that we are not looking for just any type of explanatory cause but are instead looking for a chosen, preferred type of explanation, and a certain type of causal attribution therefore becomes increasingly prevalent. When in a situation that requires attribution, the banker thinks immediately of his 'business', the Christian of 'sin' and the girl of her love. The causal instinct is conditioned and excited by feelings of fear. Familiarizing something unfamiliar is comforting, reassuring, satisfying and also produces a feeling of power. Unfamiliar things are dangerous, anxiety-provoking, upsetting, and the primary instinct is to remove this state. The urge to eliminate them is so strong that the expectation of the result often even exceeds the requirement of the process justification. This pain is therefore often interpreted as being caused by unallowable behavior and as coming from illicit acts. They are punishments, inflicted for something we should not have done(Nietzsche 179-180). While these coping measures initially appear to be irrational they instead appear, when considered from the perspective of self-protection and survival, as a unique protection mechanism. We will seek to prevent excessive negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, disappointment, helplessness and perplexity. However there is no way to directly change the external existence, and so we will construct a set of logic to control all uncertainties and subject them to the control of the civilizational system. While this attribution method satisfies the interpreter's emotional needs, it could also contribute to a new secondary disaster.

Bernard Weiner, a famous contemporary American psychologist whose work focuses on Attribution Theory, claims that the attribution process contains individual expectations and emotions. There is a reversible relationship between certain connections, such as the cognition and emotion of the behavior result, the attribution and expectation and the attribution and emotional expression. Although causal ascriptions do not influence the goal's objective properties, they do guide its emotional impact. When the disaster or other negative outcomes are attributed to uncontrollable causes, pity is more likely to be experienced than anger. But conversely, if controllable factors are chosen as the main cause of interpretation, then anger is indeed elicited. Blame and aggression are therefore linked with perceptions of causal controllability. In contrast to the linkage between controllability and anger, uncontrollable causes are associated with pity because this means someone has to be perceived as the responsible subject(Weiner 135-161). Gilman studies the cultural influence of the plague and observes that when we acquiesce to suffering on the grounds that it must serve a certain purpose, it is likely to produce absurd results: indeed, the victims of the disease will be regarded as the sinners that caused the disease to spread(Gilman 25). The "Black Death" that raged in Europe and other continents caused tens of millions of human deaths and gave rise to divergent explanations throughout history, including rotten air and the movement of planets. Others insisted that the plague was a divine punishment for the depravity of human nature and moral degradation. Even the Jews were blamed and, as in other instances, scapegoated.

Gilman observes that this type of thesis is now outdated, and notes that it is only evangelicals that are likely to base their epidemiology on an assumption of national guilt (this fact notwithstanding, it is clear that actions taken or not taken by nations can increase their vulnerability to epidemic disease)(Gilman 29). And he obviously underestimated the vitality of this theory. Personality, whether regarded as part of the whole body or as a functional owner that is integrated into the political or natural order, will experience strong pressure during the plague. When confronted by the choice of survival, good and evil fall away. Humans are a unity of good and evil that coexists, and the seeking of advantages and avoiding of disadvantages is a law of human nature. As the disease spreads, the anxiety and anger suppressed in a peaceful society are gradually released. Instincts of survival, greed and the fear of death assert themselves in response to the threat of life or death. They form a complex moral relationship and interact with regulations, beliefs and ethics, and this also establishes a stage for the full interpretation of various aspects of human nature.

A Journal of the Plague Year listed many such examples: violence between patients and quarantine caregivers; priests and doctors who run away regardless of their duties; those who conceal their illness and do not care about spreading the disease to others; those who are indifferent and unwilling to lend a hand to refugees; those who steal and rob; those who insult God's name and being. The narrator expresses concern they will become terrible examples of God's justice and quotes from Jer. v. 9: "Shall I not visit for these things? Saith the Lord: and shall not My soul be avenged of such a nation as this?"(*Journal* 59)

The disaster is temporary, but its social impact may last longer. Blaming a certain group or individual for the disaster can provide a certain degree of psychological control and help people to work towards a

solution through a circuitous path. But as long as there is an interpretation, there will be an interpreter, and he/she will inevitably have personal intentions. It is difficult to avoid moral judgments and value projections that are based on imagination.

On a higher level, these interpretations of crime and punishment conceal a fundamental misunderstanding of the biological nature of human beings and this highlights that our understanding of 'disease' mixes cultural and biological concepts. The question becomes who to blame and the inherently cruel and unjust nature of disease is overlooked. The health and survival of the group is prioritized, and this means that the well-being and rights of individual members become secondary – disease constructs hierarchies like race and gender, and separates mankind from the inside. In order to ensure the survival of the whole community, some "reasonable differential treatment" for patients becomes widely accepted. Even if a healthy person has some connection with the disease, he/she will be labeled as a potential virus spreader and will encounter fear and hostility from familiar groups.

Disasters worsen the living environment and efforts to achieve self-preservation are often premised on exclusivity, and this reflects the darkness of human nature, which in some sense legitimizes the desire to cast the plague as a judgement. And this of course raises the prospect that future plagues will be haunted by similar ascriptions.

It is instructive to note that Defoe, as a writer firmly in the Realist tradition, showed an eagerness to preach religious ideas and describe the actual experiences of ordinary and afflicted people in the disaster. This rendered a 'narrator' full of contradictions whose "life on paper" gave the work a more vivid interpretation and situated the individual in disaster.

3. People's Plight and People in Plight

Camus introduces his writings *Plague* with a sentence from Defoe: "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which does not exist". Plague has become established as the oldest literary theme because its universality is characterized by a certain particularity. What we encounter as illness and death are a kind of universal "plight": while rationality and consciousness present themselves as transcendental and universal, the body is rooted in temporal desire, including the need to survive. The "island" in the "Robinsonade" genre created by Defoe renders the human need to return to the natural paradise; however, this desire is frustrated by constraints that limit, block, surround and isolate.

Giddens observes that critical situations arise when "the accustomed routines of daily life are dramatically disrupted"(Giddens 123). Plague is therefore a rare opportunity to examine the relationship between personality and society. In 1720, a sudden plague broke out in Marseille, France, creating a new panic in Europe. Defoe grasped the significance of this event and revived disaster anecdotes memoirs by H.F, a London plague survivor. We can sense a kind of anxiety in the text, not just from the depictions of London in 1664 but also the external pressures exerted on the author. The narrator embodies all of these complex emotions. H.F was sometimes filled with a strange confidence that because he documented these events, he would be spared harm; this, however, did not prevent him from sometimes regretting that he had not escaped through death. His faith in God fluctuated, and so did his emotional state.

Here it should be remembered that death, and its attendant uncertainties, is the greatest source of anxiety. Da-sein is the potentiality of being, and is therefore is unable to bypass the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein and this uncertainty is therefore insurmountable(Heidegger 176). We still know little about how plague spreads in nature even if the development of medicine and instruments now make it possible for humans to clearly observe the specific characteristics of single bacteria or viruses in the laboratory. It is therefore difficult for us to understand the causes of the plague and explore treatment methods. Another study finds that the perceived spatiotemporal unpredictability, as well as the perceived dangerousness and survival relevance, of certain objects are significantly correlated with fear (Merckelbach 355–366) .In comparison with the uncertain event itself, individual differences in the tendency to react with limited tolerance (behaviorally, cognitively or emotionally) to uncertain situations appears to be the key issue related to the problem(Zvolensky 9-12).

Freud observes that if the force that causes disasters is only regarded as completely alien, then we are passive in the face of destiny, and life is only fear and despair. The humanization of nature however makes it familiar to us. We can apply the laws of human society to deprive them of their power, and we can do this by adjuring, appeasing, bribing or robbing. The replacement of natural science by Psychology

does not only provide immediate relief, but also provides a way of mastering the situation (Freud 16-17). When this kind of survival and self-esteem are seriously threatened, there is a strong tendency to seek comfort, find a way of removing the horror evoked by nature and to seek an answer to strong curiosity. But the hope that God will communicate the two realms of knowability and unknowability has planted the seeds of irreconcilable contradictions from the very outset, and this recalls Kierkegaard's observation that "[f]aith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off" (*Fear and Trembling* 44). Relying on God's salvation and filling the cognitive gap with faith does not rationalize absurdity, but creates new uncertainties in beliefs that require unconditional acceptance and this in turn creates deeper anxiety.

In the days when the city was blocked, H.F. gave himself up to God every day and applied to him with fasting, humiliation and meditation (*Journal* 118). He even regarded this as an opportunity to witness miracles, and began to actively search for the mechanism of "divine will". He did find many bad things in the city. But it is perhaps surprising to reflect that pre-set values did not lead him to biased observations. He also saw faithful priests, doctors, officials, nurse-keepers and those who sacrificed themselves to protect their families. He also extended tolerance to villagers who refused to accept and then expelled refugees. He also found that people were willing to act in good will as long as they were first protected.

But these examples also created a contradiction, as many good People fell in this common Calamity (110). If the plague was a punishment for human sins, then why would the innocent be punished? Indeed, the plague made no distinction between the poor in rags, well-dressed gentlemen, maids, ladies, gangsters and mothers unwilling to give up their children. The narrator could only attribute this to "a day of visitation and God's anger" (59). On days like this, God puts his mercy away. The innocent are also punished. As it was widely spread at the beginning of the plague: *The Place as a Space of Ground designed by Heaven for an Akeldama, doom'd to be destroy'd from the Face of the Earth; and that all that would be found in it, would perish with it* (63). In other words, it was not just sinners who suffer from the plague, as "innocent" or "good people" have to bear the same punishment. This recalls Rollo May and his observation that anxiety arises from the fact that there is no clear-cut villain, no "devil" onto which we can project our fears (May 23).

Kierkegaard held that anxiety is our "best teacher". As a perceived emotional experience, it has an important signaling function. But this raises the question of if the narrator can seek God's guidance in the plague. And it also causes him to ask if there is a significant difference between his own experience and the examples of God's punishment he has found. And this further highlights the moral value and belief that underpins the logic of the plague that he has constructed. The narrator does not just document a conflict between survival and disease, but also provides insight into the inner plight and survival of human beings in the universe. *A Journal of the Plague Year* records the psychological dialogue between the narrator and himself, and it does not intend to highlight the weakness of rationality in the face of the issue of death. Instead, it depicts the efforts of a rational subject to try to preserve his integrity when his life and value are threatened.

The philosopher of existence contends that emotion, and in particular specific emotions like anxiety, are superior to reason. The subjective character of being completely self-sufficient and removed from external influence is, for these observers, over-idealized. The author narration of the plague from a micro perspective is the unique quality of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and it serves to distinguish it from other works on the same subject. It shows how an ordinary, contradictory and imperfect individual rescues himself from disaster.

Rollo May observes that anxiety testifies to a struggle within the personality which brings to mind the role of the fever in maintaining health. For as long this struggle continues, a constructive solution remains possible (9). This tension is shown in the troubled narrator. H.F. acknowledged contradictions and gaps but always maintained that the plague was not irregular. He believed in divine will, retained his faith and also maintained a rare rationality and clarity. In addition, he also relentlessly denied more primitive belief in gods and ghosts and the wearing of charms, philters and amulets, in addition to the conduct of exorcisms (*Journal* 76). And he maintained a scientific interpretation of the spread of infectious viruses while also, by implication, affirming the government's efforts to control the plague, stabilize the order and save lives. He also endorsed the scientific methods of self-protection that were used. He used the plague to promote good deeds and did not yield to superstition.

H.F. appears to offer two vastly different but highly authoritative accounts, which are alternately rooted in rational scientific thought and strong religious belief. But rather than blindly following authority, he constantly sought to obtain results through his own observations and rational analysis. He observes that: "[W]hen I am speaking of the Plague, as a Distemper arising from natural Causes, we must consider it as it was really propagated by natural Means, nor is it at all the less a Judgment for its being under the

Conduct of human Causes and Effects; for as the divine Power has formed the whole Scheme of Nature, and maintains Nature in its Course; so the same Power thinks fit to let his own Actings with Men, whether of Mercy or Judgment, go on in the ordinary Course of natural Causes(232).

This logic is a small part of a more general and complete system of order, and we can therefore engage with *Robinson Crusoe*, by the same author, with the aim of comprehending these other parts. Defoe believes that the will of Providence is embodied in the laws of nature, which provide him with a command of causes and the ability to connect circumstances in the world(*Robinson* 184-185). This logic runs through *Journal of the Plague Year* and his other works. So apart from being invoked in religious symbols, the plague will take on an independent dynamic role, which may be contrary to the perceptions and interpretations that human beings have of themselves. Plague is not just a manifestation of God's will but is also a natural phenomenon and therefore has to abide by the rules of the natural world. As a result, it does not refer to the character and conduct of the infected person. When disease becomes its own vector, it is only possible to avoid it through caution.

This coordination enables the narrator to construct a unique plague logic and meaning, and this enables him to identify the effectiveness of certain actions and strategies. The biggest contradiction is that the subject completely dominated by nature seems to gain advantage through the interpretation mechanism, despite being subject to various kinds of uncertainties. These disturbing others are incorporated into the system and order that the subject constructs. While it appears that God is still a solid foundation and support for this rule, it is in fact the subject who chooses and dominates these interpretations. Newton wished to reserve the position of "first cause" or "first promoter" for God in the universe, and contained himself with finding the laws and guiding impulses of his orderly mechanical world. The ultimate reason was hand over to God, thus the narrator achieved the domination and freedom of individual spirit.

4. A Record and Possession for All Time

The hidden connotations of disasters are often given more attention than the disasters themselves. The plight that the plague highlights can often help us to think about other areas of existence. Indeed, interferences that surpass the text and the mapping of external culture conceal the essential insight that disease is "a fact about the body". Symbols are only needed if the meaning is not present. While explaining the disease necessarily involves culture, it is not itself a culture. Rather it is, in truth, a real physical defect and pain.

Other works recorded the London plague but they have, over the course of time, been lost. *A Journal of the Plague Year* is one of the last remaining records that still retains the charm of documentary literature.

In writing a lamentable epic for the city of London in the middle of the seventeenth century. Defoe expresses his intention through the mouth of the narrator:

I have set this particular down so fully, because I know not but it may be of Moment to those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same Distress, and to the same Manner of making their Choice and therefore I desire this Account may pass with them, rather for a Direction to themselves to act by, than a History of my actings, seeing it may not be of one Farthing value to them to note what became of me(*Journal* 52).

The most interesting phrase here is "a direction to themselves to act by", as it raises the question of what Defoe thinks can be left to later generations. We find similar expressions in the map of world plague literature. Thucydides uses an independent chapter in the "*History of the Peloponnesian War*" (hereafter referred to as *The History of War*) to describe the plague that swept through Athens during the war between Athens and Sparta in 431 BC-404 BC. Thucydides emphasizes its great importance at the beginning of the book and presents the plague as the result of war and notes that the infectious plague was one of the most destructive causes of widespread death. The plague also directly changed the military strength of the city-state alliances such as those between Athens and Sparta, and therefore profoundly influenced historical trends in the Mediterranean region. The rhetorical style adopted in *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *A Journal of the Plague Year* directly descended from Thucydide's intellectual and sober tone. The most striking similarity is shown in Thucydides' description of his intention to record the war:

I shall be content if it is judged useful by those who will want to have a clear understanding of what happened — and, such is the human condition, will happen again at some time in the same or a similar

pattern. It was composed as a permanent legacy, not a show-piece for a single hearing(Thucydides 12).

Both use disaster as the theme and express similar intentions. And this raises the question of what important historical experiences they provide insight into and also raise the question of how we can be confident that they will continue to enlighten people in the future.

It has been argued that: "For the narrative of disasters, the significance does not lie in predicting certain specific events in the future, because sometimes we may be overwhelmed by random events. As in the case of the Plague at Athens, there may be nothing you can effectively do." But the constancy of human nature means that behavior patterns will often be similar in certain situations. All uncertainties, both internal and external, will ultimately lead to a similar survival plight and this means that "the same process will continue" if there is an overlap between the period of Thucydides and the contemporary period. Conceivably there will be some overlap, as human nature remains the same throughout history. This provides a basis for influencing events or at least wisely adjusting behaviour(G.E.M. 32). And this is the great value of plague literature: recording and retaining an honest documentation of these events will provide a basis for contemporary responses to similar challenges.

A Journal of the Plague Year does not exaggerate the disaster and nor is it hysterically sensational. On the contrary, it appears to be a true record of what the narrator witnessed and heard. The content appears to contain a lot of unimportant details and it has been pieced together by the narrator as he travels through the streets, hearing anecdotes about ordinary daily lives in the epidemic. This overly simple way of writing gave rise to certain doubts about its literary historical significance of the work; however, it also meant that there was no suspicion that the author had twisted or altered reality through his use of words.

We often see carelessness and missteps at the beginning of an epidemic. At this point, people still retain the illusion of health and prosperity. They try to explain the plague by referring to other diseases, or express the optimistic belief that the places where they live will not experience the plague. When the plague broke out, they had not prepared sufficiently and were therefore surprised; Scientific treatment and epidemic prevention measures were not in place, and rumors and superstitions spread. Basic medical intelligence seems to have been eliminated ("some dying of mere grief as a passion, some of mere fright and surprise without any infection at all, others frightened into idiotism and foolish distractions, some into despair and lunacy, others into melancholy madness")(Journal,69).

As the "genetic selfishness" and the same mistakes appearing again and again, we can understand that these behaviors and perceptions are not worthless. While these are seen as individual deficiencies, they are in fact cognition and behavioral tendencies that emerged from a long history of evolution.

These narratives evoke "individual experiences" that we have not actually experienced. We can project and extend our emotions, as if we face disaster and fate with those people. However, because we know the path of history, we are to some extent removed and appeared as a bystander.

Kierkegaard believed that diseases that destroy the body, including those caused by bacteria or viruses, because ultimately physical diseases result in nothing more than death. In contrast, despair is quite clearly distinct from death: there is not the slightest possibility that anybody will die from it or that it will result in physical death. Despair results from a lack of self-realization and the fact that we have not become the person we once dreamed of. Kierkegaard claimed that an individual's reality is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude. But to become concrete is neither to become finite nor infinite, and it is instead a synthesis. The individual is therefore lost in illusory possibilities that were never realized. Instead there is no power to obey or to submit to necessity and/or limitations in life(*Fear and Trembling* 69-74).

A century ago, William H. Welch, the president of the American Medical Association and a member of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, reflected that physicians and medical researchers could ultimately do little about the influenza pandemic, despite its sustained study over a two-year period. He observed: "I think that this epidemic is likely to pass away and we are no more familiar with the control of the disease than we were in the pandemic of 1889. It is humiliating, but true." (Barry 390) And even now, despite rapid developments in science, we still cannot easily answer the question about how the plague appears and how we can be saved from it. Human cognition abilities originate in sensory abilities rooted in the body, and embodied existence is the root of human finiteness. If there is no body, we are not able to perform sensory functions nor realize knowledge through physical practice. But the body also imposes limitations of time, place and perspective. The lifting of curtains only reveals more blanks. The civilization process enables humans to complete themselves, overcome limitations, seek omniscience from lack, and seek eternal life. But the ideal remains remote and illusory, and the overwhelming impression is of Sisyphus's futile effort or Sickingen's inevitable tragedy.

The purely occasional individual is as vulnerable as a grain of sand, and is subject to the influence of changing times and natural disasters. The disaster forces us to return to the origin and relearn the laws of nature. If we cannot truly understand the plague, we will cling to our social identity and cultural differences, lock ourselves in a cage of opposites, and deepen misfortune.

Schopenhauer explains how the eyes of the uncultured individual are clouded by the veil of Maya. We will see disasters and evil deeds, but we cannot realize that they are just different aspects of a life-will phenomenon. We even try to avoid evil by inflicting suffering on others through evil deeds, as a way of avoiding our own personal suffering (Schopenhauer 352).

A Journal of the Plague Year provides a life record buried under the macro level and gives us a chance to enter the stories of those distant others. After resurrecting those specific names from the forgotten rivers of history, we will see our plight in the misfortune, boredom, sadness, melancholy, despair, and nothingness they experienced.

Defoe's book evokes a deep impression of disaster and creates a historical resonance that challenges narrow prejudice. In drawing on it, we become compassionate rather than resentful and are therefore more likely to recognize, rather than condemn, the inherent weaknesses and deficiencies of humans. Indeed, we will salvage some positives: the tenacity of the struggle to survive; the persistence of belief; and the cooperation. They should be set against the backdrop of disaster and considered as resources that humans can use to transcend their biological limitations. Indeed, this recalls Lu Xun, a renowned Chinese writer, who once observed that "[despite] the infinite distance, countless people are related to me."

More than 300 years have passed since London's great plague. However, Defoe provides insights and perspectives that can be applied to others. The specific connotation of historical life is always changing and developing, but individuals seeking an independent life form in specific historical life is transpersonal and pan-historical. Kierkegaard understood the human self to be a derived, established relation; something that relates itself to itself and that, in relating itself to itself, relates itself to another. In other words, he viewed it as key to living (*Fear and Trembling 13-14*). It is only by surpassing the dualistic moral judgment of oneself and the other and using a universal bioethics to observe the plague that it will be possible to remove the prejudices and metaphors attached to the plague and return to its original meaning of illness and pain. Experience and wisdom will enable us to re-understand the concepts of life, disease and health in a way that changes and improves the contemporary living conditions.

5. Conclusion

The British essayist William Hazlitt once observed how the Journal's 'epic grandeur' is leavened by 'heart-breaking familiarity' (*Journal 17*), and this highlights how disaster helps to produce a deeper understanding of human vulnerability and greatness. Death and destruction lead us to re-examine life, and this gives plague literature a significance that extends beyond the literary field.

Wars, plagues and other disasters have ravaged human society throughout history. Reopening the long history of disaster narration will cut across dividing lines of history and nationality and connect with others. We can find the amazing similarities in history, the fragility and greatness common to human nature and the devaluation and sublimation of life. Ignorance and reason; animality and divinity; reality and ideals; hope and despair; these are all part of the distinctively human.

Humans have limitations. Freely and autonomously choosing life activities and behaviors, resisting the restriction and temptation of fate and endeavoring to achieve self salvation are all parts of a life aesthetic. While faith cannot remove the threat of death alone, it provides a source of strength in predicament and promotes survival, which is the greatest power.

The process of history has never been peaceful, and has always been accompanied by catastrophe, including earthquakes, floods and plagues. These have however produced tenacious vitality that has sustained human civilization, as *A Journal of the Plague Year* vividly illustrates and reiterates.

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