

Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Intro by Catherine Henze. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004. ISBN 0-7607-5237-0

Pre-Unit Reading: Students should have done an initial reading of this book in its entirety BEFORE doing any of these 50 minute class activities which require closer in-class readings.

### Day One: The Plague

Using this interactive website, introduce students to how London dealt with the plague of 1665. <http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/snapshots/snapshot49/snapshot49.htm>. (50 minutes)

### Day Two: The Author and the Journal.

Film Clip: Go to this website for a four minute video. See the effects of the Black Plague in Bristol England during a similar plague of the 1300's.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/multimedia\\_zone/audio\\_video/video/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/multimedia_zone/audio_video/video/index.shtml). Lead a discussion which checks for student comprehension of the characteristics and effects of the plague (20 minutes).

*The Man* (Introduction, vii-ix) (10 minutes)

Question: What was Daniel Defoe like as a person, and how did this influence the way he wrote?

#### Possible Answers

- 1.) Defoe, the narrator of the story, visited the massive "pit" where many plague victims had been catapulted into a mass grave. He describes this as a "speaking sight". This experience probably inspired him to write in vivid ways about the 1665 plague in London (Introduction vii)
- 2.) Defoe survived many disasters himself, and so was uniquely qualified to write the first "disaster novel" (Introduction vii).
- 3.) Defoe was scorned by the upper-class masses because of his desire and ability to identify with the lower classes (Introduction viii).
- 4.) Defoe began writing fiction at the age of sixty (Introduction viii). His contemporaries were John Locke, Alexander Pope, William Congreve, Jonathan Swift, and journalist Richard Steele. Each of these authors creates an intellectual context in which Defoe can be placed (Introduction viii).
- 5.) Defoe was a religious dissenter (Introduction ix), and so he probably could approach the topic with non-sectarian objectivity. He was also barred from attending the university.
- 6.) Defoe wrote *The Journal of the Plague Year* in response to a "fresh outbreak of the infection in Marseilles in 1720" (Introduction ix). Robert Walpole, who mandated that infected persons be shut up to keep the infection from spreading in England, may have been the prompt which caused Defoe to write about the pros and cons of this practice during the plague of 1655.
- 7.) Defoe's uncle occurs under the initials H.F. in the *Journal of the Plague Year* (Introduction ix), although he never kept a journal or resided in London during the outbreak.

*The Genre* (Introduction x) (10 minutes)

Question: Is Defoe's Journal a work of history, fiction, or historical fiction?

Possible Answers:

- 1.) The genre of Defoe has been debated since the 1770's. Was it fiction? Was it history? Was it historical fiction? Most important for the current debate is perhaps this. The text was written by someone who chose to stay with those who suffered as they suffered (Introduction x). The suffering of persons was not a fiction. It was real. So was Defoe, in every sense of that word.

*The Themes* (Introduction xii-xiii) (10 minutes)

Question: What are some of the big themes of Defoe's Journal?

Possible Answers:

- 1.) The general miseries of the sufferers (Introduction xi).
- 2.) the particular miseries of some (Introduction xii).
- 3.) the emphasis upon God and Nature as controlled and directed by Him (Introduction xii-xiii).
- 4.) "...Although the subject of *A Journal of the Plague Year* is indeed grim, the story, on the whole, is engaging and uplifting, in part due to the countless stories of both public servants and private citizens alike selflessly and courageously contributing to the ease and survival of the infected, often at the cost of their own lives" (Introduction xiii).
- 5.) "*A Journal of the Plague Year* focuses on compassion for the poor, the goodness and effectiveness of the government, and, moreover, the human spirit of resourcefulness in the face of an immense impersonal disaster" (Introduction xiii).

**Day Three: The Structure of the Journal.**

Go to <http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/England-History/GreatPlague.htm> for a short student review and further description of the plague of 1665 (10 minutes).

*The References to Time:* (20 minutes).

How does Defoe treat the passage of time in his Journal?

Have students thumb through the entire book looking for the markings of a typical journal looking for an answer to this question.

Question: Is this journal written as we might write one, i.e. a specific date followed by a description? Or, does he do something different?

Possible Answers:

- 1.) Many journals we write today list date, time, and events in detailed chronological order. Defoe does not do this. Instead, his *Journal of the Plague Year*, is free from the constant barrage of dates, times, and events. When Defoe delineates the passage of time, it is always through statistically objective charts listing the dead in their ever increasing numbers. In this way, his presentation becomes an occasionally detached, yet always journalistic, factual, recording of events. This style of journalizing creates a plague that seems like a long, drawn out experience, where time during the days of suffering seems to stand still. Doesn't time often pass slowly for those in pain?

*The Significance of the Charts* (5; 6; 48; 97-8; 112; 115-16; 151; 176; 184-5; 186-87; 202) (20 minutes).

Question: How does each of the charts contribute to the overall structure of Defoe's Journal, both individually and collectively?

**Possible Answers:**

- 1.) Such charts record the mounting deaths and so the increasing tragedy (112; 176).
- 2.) They compare the deaths by the plague and other causes (97-8).
- 3.) They document how the plague targeted for death the most vulnerable in the population:
- 4.) children, abortive and stillborn (115-16).
- 5.) They speak about the far reaching nature of the plague (151; 184-7).
- 6.) They tell how individuals died from other causes than just the plague (202).

**Day Four: The Poetry and Illustrations of the Journal.**

*The Three Poems* (23; 149; 243) (30 minutes).

Question: Why would Defoe want to write poetry in the year of a plague?

**Possible Answers:**

- 1.) Defoe's poetry captures the feelings of horrors that the plague created in the minds of the sufferers (23).
- 2.) This victim poetry—the orthography etched on the marquee—seems to suggest someone in the final death throes from the plague. Could mere prose by Defoe have captured the victims' feelings? An ounce of illustration is worth a pound of explanation.
- 3.) Poetry captures the feelings of the survivor in light of the 1000,000 who did not survive. Is this gratitude? Or, is this survivor guilt?

Question: What do these three poems uniquely contribute to the Journal?

**Possible Answers:** It has been said that no one can tell history quite like a poet.

*The Illustrations* (34, 149) (20 minutes)

Question: What do these contributions uniquely contribute to the Journal?

**Possible Answers:**

- 1.) The ABRACADABRA pyramid operates as visual text illustrating the desperation people, felt and their willingness to consult with the superstitious to assuage the plague over which they had no control (34).
- 2.) The uses of crosses and marks were attempts to accomplish the same (34).
- 3.) Once again, the victim poetry—the orthography etched on the marquee—seems to suggest someone in final death throes. One picture is worth a thousand words (149).
- 4.) Defoe's *Journal of the Plague* is a mixed media text for and about his times.

**Day Five: The Themes of the Journal:**

Visit <http://www.insecta-inspecta.com/fleas/bdeath/Stop.html> to introduce students to the efforts that were made to stop the plague (10 minutes)

Review the overview (Introduction, xiii). Remind students that 1.) the plight of the poor; 2.) the role of the government; 3.) the role of religion; and 4.) the practices of disease prevention are all themes found in Defoe's Journal (10 Minutes).

Choose one or more of these themes for discussion (30 minutes). Divide class in discussion groups and assign each a theme to locate and discuss.

*The Plight of the Poor (34; 56)*

Question: How did poverty prepare the poor for the plague (89)?

Possible Answer:

The poor, more than any other social group, were able to approach this suffering using the same “brutal courage” they used everyday (89). They were not cautious in helping others, for they were seldom “cautious” in helping themselves.

Question: Do you think that the rich coped as well? Why? Or, why not?

Possible Answer: Maybe the rich lacked the practical resources of knowing how to deal with tragedy? Tragedy would have probably been the daily lot of the poor.

*The Role of the Government (37)*

Question: How did the Government help the people of London during the crisis?

Possible Answer: Magistrates took prudent measures to isolate the poor. They made sure order, not chaos, reigned. They shut up infected houses and thereby quarantined infected persons. Overall, they performed a good service (37)

*The Role of Religion (190, 194)*

Some people cried out “I’m struck from heaven” (190). One man was told to, “Look up to God”, and later he died. Another person, the narrator of the story, experienced protection from the plague (14).

Questions: Why did some die? Why did some live?

Possible Answer: Defoe suggests that both life and death were because of the “judgements of God... and His providence” (190).

Question: What do you think about this practical advice? (194)

Possible Answer: Answers should be in response to Defoe’s statement: “I know people encourage themselves by saying God is able to keep us in the midst of danger, and able to overtake us when we think ourselves out of danger; and this kept thousands in town, whose carcasses were into the great pits by cartloads, and who, if they had fled from the danger, had I believe been safe from the disaster; at least, ‘tis probable they had been safe.” (195)

*The Practices of Disease Prevention (39-47)*

Question: How would the medical profession respond today?

Possible Answers: Defoe list many practices used to help prevent the spread of the plague: appointment of caretakers (39-41), the shutting up of houses (42), the fumigation of personal property (42), specific ways of burying the dead (43), and limits on the public’s recreations (46-7)

What, if any, of these methods would work today?

Can you think of other necessary preventative measures that are not listed?

Conclusion: What are plagues happening today? Where are they happening? What should be the response to human catastrophe?

Possible Answers: Have students do an internet search. Or, for a current example, see Zambia: Bubonic Plague Outbreak found at [http://www.who.int/csr/don/2001\\_03\\_20a/en/](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2001_03_20a/en/) This short article by the World Health Organization relates the details of an outbreak of the plague in Zambia in April 2001.