

Pulverizing the Plague through Art and Literature

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The COVID-19 pandemic has compelling parallels to the plague and other deadly pestilences of the past when civilizations, perhaps did not have access to basic medical facilities. Now, despite better health care facilities vis-à-vis the past, the pandemic has rendered everyone vulnerable. The erstwhile and current superpowers – Italy and United States of America respectively have had to throw in the towel in the face of the pandemic. As the pandemic continues to unleash its reign of terror in every other part of the world, this paper focuses on the discourses around epidemics or deadly pestilences through select literary contributions of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) and two visual texts, the *Danse Macabre* (or Dance of Death) and Pieter Bruegel, the Elder's *The Triumph of Death*. The involvement with these art forms – visual and literary, could have perhaps enabled the artists to pulverise the dread of the plague. This paper firstly situates – *Danse Macabre*, *The Triumph of Death* (visual mediums) and the select works of Shakespeare and Defoe (literary texts) in the historical and literary context of the plague. Secondly, it examines the possible trauma consequential to the plague in the works of the writers and finally it examines the times where the plague is an intangible and metaphorical catalyst that affects life and society at large in the past and in contemporary times.

Situating Plague Discourses within historical, artistic and literary contexts

Millions of people across age, time and space perished due to the plague which has been on the scene before the Middle Ages. However, while the plague raged on, artists and authors created art work, wrote magnificent pieces of literature to reiterate that life and death are part of our existence and therefore one must not fear it. By confronting the deadly pestilences through art and literature, the artists and writers pulverized the various anxieties caused by the pandemics.

The Visual Relief amidst Catastrophe

The plague of 1348 had a very powerful impact on the cultural and literary ethos of the time reflecting the darkness of death frequently. Morbidity and pessimism became manifest in macabre art forms. Although the visuals contained skeletons and other morbid images, they attempted to cast out fear among the spectators. *Danse Macabre* (Figure 1) and *The Triumph of Death* portrayed the presence of death alongside life. They did not suggest that only death must rule. The *Danse Macabre* was a visual and poetic art form embedded in the fourteenth century portraying “corpses or skeletons joining hands with people from Pope to peasant and dancing them away to the next world” (Byrne 2012, 99-101). “Dances of Death were artistic expressions of human mortality, executed either monumentally (mainly as a wall painting) or graphically (in the form of prints or books). They depict a metaphorical encounter between Death and representatives of human society in their last moments of earthly life” (Mackenbach and Dreier 2012, 915-16). The irony of the iconography is that it represents the social hierarchy supposedly ordained by God. Each of the characters in the hierarchy had their own sins that were sharply admonished. However, it is not difficult to miss that the upper crust of society was largely represented by the artists and therefore the Dances of Death almost read like early forms of social satire (Mackenbach and Dreier 2012, 916). Death was recognized as a common experience for every living being whether rich or small. Anecdotal evidence suggests that even mortality from the bubonic plague was higher in the lower social classes, partly because the very rich had the opportunity to escape from plague-ridden towns by going to their

country houses, thereby reducing their risks of infection (Cipolla and Zanetti 1972 as quoted in Mackenbach and Dreier 2012, 915).



Figure 1: Wolgemut, Michael. "The Dance of Death." 1493. Woodcut with watercolor (hand coloring), The Karen G. and Dr. Elgin W. Ware, Jr. Collection, 2003, Texas

Post-1348 the motif called The *Triumph of Death* (Figure 2) gained prominence with leading Petrarchan poet such as Francesco Petrarch writing on The *Triumph of Death*. Earlier he wrote long poems in Latin on the *Triumph of Cupid* and *Triumph of Chastity*. The enormity of mass deaths caused due to the Black Death intensified the significance of The *Triumph of Death* motif which predates the hecatombs which are ancient Greek and Roman sacrifices of 100 oxen or cattle (Byrne 2012, 346). It was depicted in chapels, graveyards, hospitals and places where people gathered. One of the many versions of The *Triumph of Death* was by the Dutch and Flemish painter Bruegel, the Elder (Figure 3) who painted a vast expanse consisting of humans, skeletons, wrecked ships and domesticated animals. In presenting a panoramic view of everyday existence in the mid-sixteenth century, Bruegel graphically portrays the imminent threat to life through the depiction of skeletons accompanying the characters. It shows a close encounter with death.

Joseph Byrne suggests that “death does not necessarily mean damnation or oblivion...The *Triumph of Death* is a warning, not a threat. Death may triumph, but the devil need not. Obliviousness and resistance are futile; penance and redirection of life are not” (Joseph P. Byrne 2012, 346).



Figure 2: Unknown. "The Triumph of Death." c.1446. Fresco, 600 cm × 642 cm (240 in × 253 in). Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia



Figure 3: Elder, Pieter Bruegel the. "The Triumph of Death." c.1562. oil on panel, 117 cm × 162 cm (46 in × 63.8in), Madrid, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Contextualizing Shakespeare and Defoe

The plague was a veil through which Shakespeare, Defoe and many others had to negotiate their lives. While Shakespeare did not set his plays in London, Defoe makes London the focal point of the plague discourse. The death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 was nothing less than a catastrophe for her subjects, on the other hand the return of Charles II from exile at Defoe's birth in 1660 was the restoration of monarchy and thus, presumed stability. While Shakespeare's contemporaries might have watched life unfold with some trepidation due to the departure of the powerful Queen, Defoe's generation woke up to a new dawn beyond the Puritanical regime.

Though Shakespeare did not write particularly on the plague, he makes strong allusions to the plague in plays *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Theatre Historian J. Leeds Barroll III indicates that between 1606 and 1610, the period in which Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest plays from *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, the London playhouses were not likely to have been open for more than a total of nine months (Greenblatt, 2020). In 1593-94, when the theatres were shut, Shakespeare used the quarantine period to write two long narrative poems: *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece*. The need for income would have compelled Shakespeare to dive into poetry, probably. Thus, some of his best works have been written during the epidemics. While Shakespeare used the quarantine period to create some of his most renowned works, Defoe wrote a docu-fictional novel called *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1772) which recalls the plague of 1665. Although from different temporal zones, the common denominator that unites the two writers is their representation of the plague. Both Shakespeare and Defoe were trendsetters in their respective genres - Shakespeare a towering playwright and Defoe the pioneering novelist in English Literature. The two visual texts - *Dance Macabre*, *The Triumph of Death* (1562) and (versions available as early as 1312) have commemorated the deadly pestilences like no others due their ability to show how such epidemics disregard hierarchies in society.

Plague and the resultant Trauma – an Intangible Catalyst for Literature

Trauma caused by the plague plays as an intangible catalyst that affects life and society. The appearance of deadly pestilences at regular unwelcome intervals may have varied around the globe but they have remained as a latent diabolic force striking humanity when the guards of immunity are lowered. They have been around since 1200 BC as per documented records (Moritz 1922, Chap 1). The diverse nomenclatures – Bubonic plague, Pneumonic plague, Septicaemic plague, Small-pox, Typhus, Spanish influenza, Ebola, Cholera, Nipah, COVID-19 percolated civilizations to conquer and vanquish many. Ernest B. Gilman regards HIV/AIDS as the pandemic of the late twentieth century. In this phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, one can only hark back at Gilman's words – "...past plagues are still present to us, exerting their pressure as shards of cultural memory, traumatic fragments that still have the power to wound even if – especially if – their substance has been "forgotten" (Gilman 2009, 5). Plague thus came to be viewed metaphorically as a condition that highlights acute social disharmony and trauma.

Since the plague left in its wake a number of people dead, it affected the people who were alive not only with a sense of relief that they escaped death but a sense of survivor's guilt, sometimes. The enormity of the plague can be compared to large scale violence that spells doom and destruction in the form of death, thereby causing fear and anxiety. So is the trauma of having experienced the phase of an epidemic. Trauma, a word that has originated from Greek, originally means a "wound", originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. In its newer usage, in medical and psychiatric literature, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (Caruth 1996, 3). "First, in classic medical usage "trauma" refers not to the injury inflicted but to the blow that inflicted it, not to the state of mind that ensues but to the event that provoked it" (Erikson 1995, 184). Defoe was a five-year-old when the bubonic plague struck London. It is purported that young Defoe could have been shifted outside London. This shift is reproduced in *A Journal in the scene of the flight* that people take at the onset of the plague in London. It left several thousands dead and Defoe would have ostensibly grown up with stories of the plague.

Similarly, Shakespeare experienced the plague at numerous stages in his life. Since his father John was intensely involved in the relief work, Shakespeare would have heard the stories of the apocalyptic event (Dickson 2020). There were particularly severe outbreaks of plague in 1563 when Shakespeare was three months old. Then again in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, 1608-09, and 1625. In 1593, when Shakespeare had established himself as a powerful writer, the Globe and other theatres were shut down. Records suggest they were shut down for an astonishing total of 78 months (6.5 years) between 1603-1610 – more than 60% of the time” (Dickson 2020). Further in 1606, his landlady, Marie Mountjoy perhaps died of the plague.

The plague spelt death around Europe. Gilman writes, “In 1603, (almost) 25,045 plague burials (out of a total of 31,861 burials) were recorded in London and liberties. As London’s total population is estimated at 141,000 for that same year, the plague claimed one in five. In 1625, there were 26,350 plague burials out of a total urban population of 206,000” (Gilman 2009, 35). Since Shakespeare was a shareholder, occasionally an actor in his company and the main playwright, he struggled with the repeated closing of the theatre which would have been economically debilitating. The Great Plague of 1665 on which Defoe based his *A Journal* killed around 80,000 people. During the course of *A Journal* around 1720-1722 Marseille’s final plague epidemic had begun to spread, however it was controlled in that region. Despite that 50,000 people died (Byrne 2012, xxi). In the nature of trauma which recurs from time to time, epidemics too have historically shown that “between those who succumb to the disease itself and those who, as survivors, nonetheless harbor the germ of a latent traumatic (re) infection. Plague’s infectious process might then be most fully comprehended as an epidemic event that over time turns into, and returns as, its traumatic aftermath” (Gilman 2009, 56). Both Defoe and Shakespeare could not ignore the plague because it was a fear that they lived with. Just as people who escaped the 1919 pandemic of the Spanish Flu, Shakespeare and Defoe could be regarded as survivors too. Therefore, the image of the plague was a steadfast thought which kept appearing in their writings. Cathy Caruth in her book *Trauma – Explorations in Memory* says, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 1995, 4-5).

Plague as a Memory of Trauma in 'A Journal'

Shakespeare, Defoe, Bruegel, the Elder and the numerous artists of the *Danse Macabre* could have experienced trauma due to the plague. Cathy Caruth says that trauma can only be re-lived because it is a response to an event of the past. However, trauma continues to remain as a latent force within the individual and manifests itself “in dreams, hallucinations, neurotic physical or psychosomatic symptoms, obsessive behavior, and occasionally works of art” (Gilman 2009, 55). Cathy Caruth opines that traumatic memories are “unassimilated scraps” (Kolk and Hart 1995, 176) of intense experiences. These memories need to blend with the existing mental system, and be metamorphosed into cohesive language. In order to fructify this process, “the traumatised person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it” (Kolk and Hart 1995, 176). The traumatic experience or memory does not follow a chronological pattern of a beginning, a middle and an end which is the nature of narrative memory (Kolk and Hart 1995, 177). Both Defoe and Shakespeare’s proximity to the plague-discourse and their first-hand experience of the plague were part of their subconscious. According to Pierre Janet the French psychologist, who coined the word “subconscious”- it is a collection of automatically stored memories that form the map that guides subsequent interaction with the environment (Caruth 1995, 159).

Defoe’s subconscious memories could have triggered the writing of the plague discourse in the form of a journal. Presumably, he used the copious journal entries his uncle Henry Foe (who died in 1674) made in his diary during the 1665 plague. The narrator of *A Journal* signs off with the initials H.F and is a saddler like his uncle which perhaps is a tacit recognition of his uncle’s journal. However, it is difficult to comprehend the authenticity of the narrative based on a single person’s journal entry. Therefore, critics opine that Defoe could have borrowed matter from recollections by relatives and friends and partly “from written sources such as the *Weekly Bills of Mortality* and Nathaniel Hodges’ contemporary report *Eoimologia*” (Hammond 1993, 106). Defoe’s *A Journal* invariably calls to mind the *Danse Macabre* and *The Triumph of Death* visuals.

Regarded as the pioneering historical fiction in the English Language, Defoe uses the journal-form as if he was a witness to the event as it unfolded. Hammond

says, "His anecdotes are so circumstantial and seemingly authentic as to add a solid dimension of realism to his account" (Hammond 1993, 109). Defoe's skill as a journalist enables him to create such a sense of legitimacy to the story that "many contemporary readers accepted the Journal at face value as an eye-witness account written at the time of the Great Plague. Even today it is easy to make the same mistake, lulled by Defoe's expertise as a literary counterfeiter into a total suspension of disbelief" (Hammond 1993, 106).

Quarantining, isolation and social distancing were practised in Defoe's London. All religious gatherings were forbidden, houses with infected patients were shut and watched by deputed watchmen working in shifts. Nurses who cared for the patients, were expected to stay with them and after the patients recovered or died, they would be expected to self-isolate themselves for 28 days in a house that would then be shut down. Further, if any infected person ever visited someone, the latter had to self-isolate him/herself for 20 days. People resented being locked-up and constantly monitored. Carts carrying the dead (dead-carts) and burials in mass graves were normal. Barring the church warden and the constable, no one else was allowed for funerals. Quacks proclaiming cure existed then too however, as the epidemic intensified the astrologers and fortune-teller conjurers disappeared.

Plague as a metaphorical catalyst in Shakespeare

Shakespeare used the plague as a metaphor or perhaps a plot device in his plays. The metaphor of illness is abundant in his plays especially post-1603, when a powerful outbreak of the illness led to the postponement of James I's coronation. His *Timon of Athens*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* have the metaphor of illness as one of the leitmotifs. In *King Lear*, Lear uses metaphors of disease and plague while speaking to his daughter, Goneril who betrays him miserably:

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
A plague sore, an embossed carbuncle (*King Lear* Act II, Scene IV, 216-18).

Stephen Greenblatt writes, “In Shakespeare, epidemic disease is present for the most part as a steady, low-level undertone, surfacing in his characters’ speeches most vividly in metaphorical expressions of rage and disgust” (Greenblatt, 2020). Mercutio from *Romeo and Juliet*, when he is wounded due to the fight between the Capulets and the Montagues cries, “A plague on both your houses” (*Romeo and Juliet* Act III, Scene I). Just like *The Triumph of Death* and *Dance Macabre*, Shakespeare’s use of the plague as a metaphor projected the everyday presence of the epidemic in people’s lives. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the messenger commissioned by Friar Lawrence goes into quarantine due to the epidemic and thus, fails to deliver the crucial letter informing Romeo about Juliet’s fake death. Interestingly, no one dies due to the plague in Shakespeare’s plays. Emma Smith says, “*Romeo and Juliet*, who die because the Friar’s letter is held up by quarantine measures in northern Italy, are the nearest his work comes to plague fatalities” (Smith 2020). There are deaths in his tragedies but those are not sudden deaths in society. “Documentary realism was not Shakespeare’s style” (Smith 2020). However, Defoe revels in that style in *A Journal*.

Shakespeare does not focus on the mass burial pits for plague victims which was one of the important symbols that showcased the erasure of social, gender and personal difference. René Girard, the French critic, wrote in a famous essay called *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology*, “the distinctiveness of the plague is that it ultimately destroys all forms of distinctiveness” (Girard 1988, 137). Shakespeare’s tragedies reflect the proximity of death however, as opposed to the uniform decimation caused due to the plague, his plays highlight the importance of the individual. Emma Smith writes, “The paradox of tragedy is that it underscores the significance and distinctiveness of the individual even as it moves him inexorably toward his end. It does not defy death; it re-endows it with meaning and specificity. No one in Shakespeare’s plays dies quickly and obscurely, thrown into a communal grave. Rather, last words are given full hearing, epitaphs are soberly delivered, bodies taken offstage respectfully” (Smith 2020).

The years 1592 to 1665 were punctuated with a series of plague and they had consequences on the artistic landscape. However, the plague has been perceived as a metaphor representing disharmony and disturbance. For instance, Albert

Camus' *La Peste* (The Plague), is often read as an allegory to the Nazi occupation of France (Judt 2001). Girard regards the word plague as a metaphor for social discord because he believes ours is "a world where the plague and epidemics in general have disappeared almost altogether" (as quoted in Gilman 2009, 4). During Shakespeare's time, the plague was not a distant reality. Nevertheless, he uses the plague metaphorically or allegorically in his plays. For Defoe, it is almost an experience of trauma that keeps playing on his mind. He reconstructs the same epidemic many years later from an amalgam of childhood memory and journalistic research, at a moment in 1722 when London seemed again vulnerable to an outbreak of plague (Gilman 2009, 247).

The Inevitable Parallels

While examining the visual and literary texts related to the plague, there is a sense of *deja vu* that one invariably experiences. *Danse Macabre*, The *Triumph of Death*, Defoe's *A Journal* and Shakespeare's reference to the plague remind us of the proximity of deadly pestilences to our lives and role of the catalyst that they play almost invisibly in re-configuring our systems pertaining to health care and education. The topicality of the texts enables the readers to connect with them. Social distancing, quarantining, migrant workers returning to their villages, essential supplies getting affected, the spread of the contagion, mass burials, lack of adequate health care, over-worked cops and health care professionals – all of these have been part of every system across the world.

This pandemic too will not go without leaving a residue of trauma among many. It constructed memories that will stay in the collective unconscious of not only ordinary individuals but also nations. Pandemics were things of the past but now they are at our door step bringing with them untold complications. It makes one wonder about the narratives that will emerge from this time – would it be a black comedy in the vein of a *Waiting for Godot* encapsulating the plight of the migrant workers or the hopelessness of the daily wage worker or massive outburst of online romantic literatures? It will be worthwhile to interrogate our memories to check what is stored in our mental repositories – will we recall the lighting of the candles, the banging of the vessels or the memes or

Instagram or twitter notifications or the songs that emerged from Italian balconies or the support that came from Cuban doctors or the nurses from Kerala? Pandemics have produced art and literature which have stood the test of time – we hark back at them for re-assurance. Will the future look to our art and literature for re-assurance?

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