

Comparative Analysis: Exploring Pandemic Narratives in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus's *The Plague*

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Abstract. This paper will explore and contrast the depictions of pandemics in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947). While both works engage with the theme of pestilence, they differ significantly in their historical context, narrative style, thematic emphasis, and philosophical perspectives. Defoe's novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), set amidst the bubonic plague outbreak of 1665 in London, adopts a first-person narrative approach, resembling a journal or chronicle. It meticulously documents the physical, social, and psychological effects of the plague on London society, emphasising survival and resilience amidst adversity. On the other hand, Camus' novel *The Plague* (1947), set in the fictional Algerian city of Oran during a bubonic plague outbreak, employs a third-person omniscient narrator. It explores existential themes such as the absurdity of human existence, the quest for meaning in suffering, and the nature of heroism amidst a seemingly absurd crisis. This comparative analysis examines how Defoe's work focuses on the practical aspects of survival and societal breakdown, while Camus' novel explores the philosophical underpinnings of human response to calamity. By juxtaposing these two narratives, this paper sheds light on the evolution of pandemic literature and offers insights into the ways historical and existential perspectives shape our understanding of pandemics across centuries.

Keywords : Pandemic; comparative; resilience; absurdity; suffering; heroism; survival.

The Covid-19 pandemic in recent times has reignited our enthusiasm for pandemic literature. In their anxiety and doubt, ordinary people want to read such books in order to know what will come ahead and how to act in such circumstances. They also find comfort in the fact that humanity has confronted such trials before and come victorious out of them. However, literary critics want to read these books in order to find a relationship with the Covid-19 pandemic and examine the specific theme, narrative

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technique, expression, and approach of pandemic-based literary works (Tica et al. 125). In her book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), Priscilla Wald describes pandemic narratives as “critiques of socioeconomic inequities and titillating tales of apocalyptic struggles with primordial earth demons, hard-headed analyses of environmental exhaustion, and hopeful stories of timeless renewal (10).

The paper will explore and compare the two most important works that deal with the theme of pandemic, namely Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) and Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947). Despite sharing a common theme of pestilence, these two works differ significantly in their historical context, narrative style, thematic emphasis, and philosophical perspectives. Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* offers a first hand account of the bubonic plague outbreak that ravaged London in 1665. On the other hand, Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* presents a fictional but equally compelling description of the pandemic that broke out in the Algerian city of Oran around the 1940s.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: firstly, to compare and contrast the depictions of pandemics in Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus’ *The Plague*, examining their historical contexts, narrative techniques, thematic emphases, and philosophical perspectives. Secondly, to analyse how these works reflect the evolution of pandemic literature and shed light on human responses to calamity across different historical and existential frameworks.

Historical Context

Daniel Defoe’s historical work, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), offers a semi-fictionalised account of the bubonic plague outbreak that ravaged London in 1665. Written in the form of a first-person narrative purportedly authored by an anonymous survivor, Defoe’s work provides a vivid and detailed chronicle of the plague’s impact on London society. At the time of the Great Plague in 1665, Defoe was merely five years old, and the publication of the book itself occurred under the initials H. F. It is likely that the narrative drew inspiration from the journals of Defoe’s uncle, Henry Foe, who, like the pseudonymous ‘H. F.’, worked as a saddler and resided in East London’s Whitechapel district (*A Journal of the Plague Year*).

Following the outbreak of a plague in Marseille, France, in 1720, which instilled fear of a potential new pandemic among Europeans, Defoe drew upon his childhood recollections to compose a detailed account of life during London's 1665 plague. Drawing on historical records and eyewitness testimonies, Defoe captures the fear, panic, and despair that gripped the city during the epidemic. This work shares a great similarity in terms of subject matter with Samuel Pepys's diary. Defoe's narrative, seemingly grounded in extensive research, exhibits a significantly more organized and intricate approach compared to Pepys's personal recollection (*A Journal of the Plague Year*).

However, Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* (1947), set in the fictional Algerian city of Oran, unfolds during the outbreak of a similarly devastating plague. While Camus' novel is not explicitly tied to a specific historical event, it is widely interpreted as an allegory for the Nazi control of France during World War II and the resistance movement. During this period, Camus himself was involved in the French Resistance and contributed to a rebellious publication. Through the lens of the plague, Camus explores themes of oppression, exile, and the human response to arbitrary suffering. The plague depicted in the novel draws inspiration from numerous outbreaks of cholera and plague that ravaged Oran in the final decades of the 19th century and the outset of the 20th century. Furthermore, "the philosophical underpinnings of absurdism and existentialism, initially articulated by Søren Kierkegaard in the mid-19th century and later expounded upon by Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus himself, are evident throughout the text" (Cosby, 1).

Narrative Technique

Defoe narrates *A Journal of the Plague Year* in a documentary and journalistic style. The novel is presented as a first-person account, purportedly written by the protagonist, H.F. This narrative style creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy, as readers experience the events directly through the eyes of the narrator. It allows for a deep exploration of the protagonist's thoughts, emotions, and reactions to the progressing events. Defoe deliberately uses the names of actual regions, avenues, and even residences where occurrences unfolded to create an impression of realism. Furthermore, it offers charts that depict how many people lost their lives during the plague and intersperses personal anecdotes and observations, offering glimpses into the lives of ordinary Londoners. While the novel

follows a roughly chronological structure, it also incorporates digressions and reflections on broader themes. This nonlinear approach mirrors the chaotic and unpredictable nature of the plague itself, as well as the fragmented nature of memory and historical accounts (*A Journal of the Plague Year*).

On the contrary, Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* employs a third-person omniscient narrator, offering a broader perspective on the events unfolding in Oran. Upon first reading of *The Plague*, readers perceive the narrator as an obscure figure who promises to reveal his identity. However, as the narrative progresses, it reveals subtle hints about the narrator's identity, culminating in the final chapter that confirms his identity as Dr. Bernard Rieux, as readers may have already deduced. Upon revisiting the text, it becomes clear that Dr. Rieux's narrative violates his own prescribed guidelines for chronicling events: impartiality, obscurity, and simplicity. This departure from personal standards is a recurring motif in the book, mirroring "the divergence from individual morals and standards experienced by numerous characters as they face their respective trials" (Stromberg, 81).

In his essay "Functional Complexity: The Narrative Techniques of the Plague" (1974), Edwin Moses suggests that "Rieux's deficiencies as a storyteller actually amplify, rather than diminish, the novel's overall impact, in spite of all other arguments" (427). While recounting the outbreak of an epidemic purportedly occurring in the French Algerian harbour town of Oran during the 1940s, Dr. Bernard Rieux, a fictional chronicler, develops his own set of narrative principles. These include "clear declarations of objectives, quasi-parenthetical comments, as well as introductory remarks, explanations, and cautions" (Stromberg, 82). In fact, *The Plague* utilises various self-referential literary devices, primarily "featuring the acknowledgment of the author's presence within the text, with occasional direct interventions to comment on the constructed nature of the narrative" (Xiaohong, 14).

Thematic Emphasis

Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* emphasises the physical, social, and psychological effects of the epidemic on London society. The story is written in the first person and is narrated by H.F. as he recounts the dreadful experience of the plague. His narration begins with "a description of how plague spread in the city of Holland in September 1664 and with

the analysis of manipulated death figures given by the government” (Marwan et al. 629).

Amidst this turmoil, H.F. becomes quite upset and plans to leave London, but he changes his plan after reading the Bible and decides to surrender himself to the will of God. The miraculous lines of the psalm in *the Bible* assure him that he should “not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday” (Defoe,10). However, this expectation was short-lived, as the narrator himself fell victim to the plague. Although H.F. recovered from the disease, “the face of London was now indeed strangely altered” (12).

The narrative explores the breakdown of social order, the collapse of institutions, and the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in the midst of crises. People become prisoners in their own homes. Parents are mourning the deaths of their children, and children are crying for the loss of their parents. Poor people are facing starvation due to their inability to work. While rich people manage to run from the city, poor people “become helpless, and the majority of them get infected with disease” (Marwan *et al.* 629). In this moment of fear and anxiety, people in London tend to find more relief in “prophecies and astrological conjurations, dreams, and old wives’ tales than ever they were before or since” (Defoe,16).

While the entire novel presents the devastating impact of the plague, it also contains numerous instances of human resilience, compassion for the poor, and bravery that people in London exhibit during the pandemic. Defoe’s work also highlights themes of resilience, solidarity, and the indomitable spirit of survival that emerges in the face of adversity. H. F. narrates a variety of stories about those who make great sacrifices and demonstrate kindness for humanity in times of adversity. Throughout the story, he indirectly motivates the reader to become independent and self-disciplined and suggests numerous other practical tips that people can follow in such circumstances. These instances offer a beacon of hope amid the overwhelming despair, illustrating humanity’s capacity to endure and transcend adversity. In fact, the work concludes on a positive note “when the plague finally subsides in London, and H.F. expresses his gratitude to God that he remained there to protect him during the plague” (184).

On the other hand, Camus' novel *The Plague* explores existential themes such as the absurdity of human existence, the quest for meaning in the face of suffering, and the nature of heroism and sacrifice. He used this novel as a vehicle to propagate his philosophy of absurdism. In *The Plague*, the afflicted town, Oran, mirrors the broader cosmos, with various characters exemplifying diverse responses to the Absurd, represented by the plague itself. Cottard initially attempts self-destruction due to his remorse, which is another form of affliction, then capitalises on the epidemic, exploiting the suffering of others. Father Paneloux attempts to give meaning to the plague, saying that it is a punishment from God for our sins, but after witnessing a child's death, he changes his perception and finally himself becomes the victim of disease. The novel's main characters, namely Rieux, Tarrou, and Rambert, exemplify Camus' endorsed approach, "they acknowledge the absurdity of the plague and its unavoidable supremacy but persistently combat against it, deriving purpose from aiding others in their recovery" (Cosby, 3).

Suffering is another important theme of the novel *The Plague*. From the opening to the conclusion of the narrative, suffering emerges as a prominent entity, affecting every leading role in the story. The inhabitants of Oran not only grapple with the physical effects, but they also deal with the emotional turmoil of the plague. Camus illustrates that suffering knows no bounds, affecting individuals regardless of their socioeconomic status, whether they reside in impoverished neighbourhoods or opulent villas. The primary manifestation of suffering in the novel manifests in the victims of the bubonic plague. Michael's demise marks the onset of the epidemic's human toll, prompting deep reflection among the populace. Meanwhile, a substantial portion of the population also falls victim to the plague, "enduring symptoms such as swollen glands, elevated body temperature, confusion, and insatiable thirst. In fact, people become so frustrated with plague that they see death as the only way to get rid of their suffering" (Sreekumar, 146).

The plague brings about a positive transformation in all the major characters of the novel. Rieux exhibits less cynicism and becomes more engaged, while Othon embraces camaraderie before his demise. Tarrou's demise symbolises his ultimate victory over the plague and death itself, Grand manages to reconnect directly with his spouse, and Rambert prioritises collective welfare over personal issues. However, Cottard remains unchanged and perishes, while Paneloux, "despite valuing life

more, places emphasis on rigid doctrine, resulting in a death between despair and triumph” (Henninger, 221).

Philosophical Perspectives

Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* tends to focus more on the practical aspects of survival and resilience in the face of adversity. While the narrative does touch upon moral and philosophical themes, its primary emphasis is on documenting the events of the plague year and capturing the human experience of crisis and catastrophe. Through the portrayal of various characters and their reactions to the plague, Defoe explores the depths of human behaviour, from selfishness and opportunism to altruism and compassion. This analysis enables us “to reflect on the ethical and moral dimensions of individual and collective actions during times of adversity” (Marwan et al, 628-629).

However, Camus’ novel *The Plague* is deeply influenced by existentialist philosophy, particularly the idea of the absurd—the conflict between humanity’s search for meaning and the indifference of the universe. Essentially, this philosophy suggests that the cosmos is absurd and devoid of inherent meaning—there is no divine presence or celestial structure—and humans are destined to endure suffering and eventual death. In these circumstances, individuals have three alternatives: to end their own lives, to embrace blind faith in a higher power or order, or to acknowledge the absurd and forge their own sense of purpose. Camus advocated for the last option, considering the first choice as a form of timidity and the second as a form of self-deception akin to suicide (Cosby, 3).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Camus’ *The Plague* reveals the diverse ways in which authors deal with the theme of pandemic in literature. While Defoe provides a detailed historical account of the London plague, focusing on survival and resilience, Camus offers a philosophical exploration of existential themes in the face of crisis. By juxtaposing these two narratives, this study highlights the evolution of pandemic literature and underlines the importance of considering historical and philosophical perspectives in understanding pandemics. Through their distinct literary lenses, Defoe

and Camus offer valuable insights into human resilience, morality, and existential inquiry in times of crisis.

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