

# An Ecological Reading of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*

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## Abstract

Epidemics have been recurring events throughout human history, leaving profound impacts on social structures and the course of civilization. Each major epidemic shapes the collective memory and historical narrative of societies, often leading to significant changes in healthcare systems, governance structures, and cultural practices. Ecocriticism, a field that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, offers insights into the specific cultural perspectives and ecological views reflected in literary works. This paper applies an ecocritical perspective to interpret Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, analyzing its critique of anthropocentrism, the imbalance of spiritual ecology among London citizens during the plague, and reflections on the relationship between humans and nature depicted in the work.

## Keywords

*A Journal of the Plague Year*, Anthropocentrism, Spiritual Ecology, Ecological Reflection

## 1. Introduction

Daniel Defoe is hailed as the “father of the European novel,” “father of the English novel,” and “father of British journalism.” His works such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Captain Singleton* represent significant breakthroughs in both artistic form and quality compared to previous literary works. Defoe's writing is particularly characterized by its realism, establishing a mode of realism that “lets facts speak for themselves.” His insistence on realism is evident in the selection of material, specificity of backgrounds, simplicity of language, and vividness of detail (Li, 2006). Defoe actually has introduced a new type of novel to the world,

where the works are characterized by straightforwardness and objectivity, focusing not on “heroes” or “great men” but rather on the everyday people and their virtues found in the streets (Wu & Zhang, 2014).

*A Journal of the Plague Year* is a narrative work on the plague published by Defoe in 1722, serving as a paradigm of English plague literature. The novel is narrated from the perspective of H.F., describing the plague that struck London in 1665. The Great Plague of London, a significant outbreak of infectious disease, occurred in Britain between 1665 and 1666. It stands as the second major epidemic of bubonic plague, following previous outbreaks in Europe. During the epidemic there were over 100,000 people died, approximately one-fifth of London’s population at the time. Defoe bases his narrative on available materials and statistical data, and combines them with imagination of on-site visits to describe specific communities, streets, and even houses affected by the plague in great detail. He comprehensively reconstructed the economic, political, social structures, cultural beliefs, and urban ecology of London affected by the plague.

There are few articles in China that conduct ecocritical research on *A Journal of the Plague Year*, mostly approaching it from the perspective of narratology and interdisciplinary cultural studies. For example, in Chen Da’s article “An Exploration of the Narrative Characteristics of *A Journal of the Plague Year*”, the relationship between “reality” and fiction in Defoe’s story is analyzed, as well as the rhetorical narrative features of the book, including the analysis of implicit authorship and ethical values (Chen, 2023). Sun Wei, in the article “Analyzing the Narrative Perspective of the Plague in *A Journal of the Plague Year*”, explores how Defoe cross-utilizes the first-person experiences and narrative perspectives to prompt readers to reflect on the plague society (Sun, 2023). Additionally, Kong Derong, in the article “The Isomorphism of Medicine and Economy in *A Journal of the Plague Year*”, analyzes how Defoe’s seemingly paradoxical isolation writing reveals the isomorphic relationship between the medical reform and economic development of 17th to 18th century England, which are intertwined and mutually permeating (Kong, 2021).

Internationally, there is a diverse range of perspectives in the study of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, including cognitive theory, narratology, and new criticism. For instance, Nicholas Seager’s “Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: Epistemology and Fiction in Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*” contends that Defoe supports a subjective and narrative-based portrayal of the plague, rather than relying on misleading statistics presented as concrete truths (Seager, 2008); and Helen Thompson’s “‘It Was Impossible to Know These People’: Secondary Qualities and the Form of Character in *A Journal of the Plague Year*” argues that the plague necessitates a structured depiction of character that contradicts the apparent seamless connection between “Sensation” and “Ideas,” a characterization influenced by Locke’s emphasis on a reality beyond sensory perception (Thompson, 2013). Overall, there is still considerable room for both domestic and international ecocritical research on *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

## 2. Theoretical Guidance: EcoCriticism

In 1972, Joseph Meeker introduced the concept of “literary ecology,” which later evolved into ecocriticism, in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. *Ecocriticism* involves the interdisciplinary exploration of literature and ecology, with scholars in literary studies analyzing texts that address environmental issues and examining the diverse ways in which literature portrays nature. This critique is dedicated to challenging anthropocentrism, opposing the destruction of the natural environment by modern industrial civilization, and advocating for humanity’s ecological responsibility. Its ultimate goal is to achieve a harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, promoting an ecological pattern of living in harmony.

EcoCriticism, as an interdisciplinary field of study, examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Emerging in response to growing concerns about ecological degradation and the impacts of human activity on the planet, EcoCriticism offers a unique lens through which to analyze literary texts. At its core, EcoCriticism explores how literature reflects, critiques, and shapes attitudes towards the environment, while also considering broader socio-political and cultural contexts. By interrogating representations of nature, landscapes, and environmental crises in literature, EcoCriticism seeks to deepen our understanding of human-nature interactions and contribute to conversations surrounding environmental sustainability, social justice, and ethical responsibility. This introduction will explore the key principles, methodologies, and implications of EcoCriticism, highlighting its significance in contemporary literary studies and environmental discourse.

In EcoCriticism, scholars draw upon a range of theoretical frameworks and methodologies to analyze literary texts through an ecological lens. One key approach involves examining the ways in which authors represent nature and the environment, exploring themes such as wilderness, biodiversity, and ecological systems. Additionally, EcoCritics analyze how human characters interact with and are influenced by their natural surroundings, as well as how these interactions shape narrative structure, character development, and thematic content.

Moreover, EcoCriticism often engages with environmental philosophy, drawing on concepts such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and environmental ethics to analyze the ethical dimensions of literary representations of the environment. This interdisciplinary approach enables EcoCritics to explore issues of environmental justice, sustainability, and human responsibility towards the natural world within literary texts.

Furthermore, EcoCriticism extends beyond the analysis of individual texts to examine broader cultural narratives, literary traditions, and historical contexts. By tracing the evolution of environmental themes in literature across different time periods and genres, EcoCritics highlight changing attitudes towards nature and environmental stewardship throughout history.

Overall, EcoCriticism serves as a valuable tool for understanding the complex

relationship between literature and the environment, offering insights into the ways in which literature both reflects and shapes our perceptions of the natural world. As environmental challenges continue to escalate, EcoCriticism provides a framework for exploring the role of literature in fostering environmental awareness, promoting ecological sustainability, and inspiring collective action.

### **3. Ecological Reading on *A Journal of the Plague Year***

#### **3.1. Critique of Anthropocentrism**

Anthropocentrism is a viewpoint that places humans at the center of the universe. Essentially, it revolves around the idea that everything should serve human interests and be centered on humans. This perspective was initially associated with theological worldviews, with its earliest comprehensive articulation found in the Bible. The Bible states that the world was created by God, and among these creations, humans are His greatest achievement, with all other creations existing for the sake of humans (Sun, 2001). In the book *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the actions of the London government and citizens vividly demonstrate anthropocentrism from an ecological criticism perspective. This perspective views humans as extracting themselves from nature and regards nature as an object to be conquered. The concept of humans being in opposition to nature has led to a fragmentation of the whole, replacing the entire ecological world with human society (Song, 2006).

##### **3.1.1. Blind Tracing of the Pandemic: Innocent Animals**

The ecosystem, including humans, constitutes a living organic whole, with humans being merely equal members among others, ethically speaking, not superior to other species (Wang, 2010). Although in the process of evolution, humans possess higher intelligence than other organisms and have acquired the ability to determine the life and death of other organisms, they have not exercised it with caution.

As the plague began to spread, without identifying the source of the disease, the mayor and chief executive, based on the advice of internists, strictly ordered the killing of all cats and dogs. They believed that cats and dogs, being domestic animals, liked to roam from house to house and wander the streets and alleys. They were deemed capable of carrying the foul stench or infectious gases from the infected bodies, even within their fur and hair (Defoe, 1904). This decision was later proven futile, as the true culprit—rats—became even more uncontrollable in the absence of their natural predators, cats and dogs. The sudden outbreak of the plague in the city of London led government officials to hastily order the killing of all dogs and cats before identifying the mode of transmission. Instead of conducting investigations or simply isolating animals in the infected areas, this quarantine policy reflected anthropocentrism, prioritizing human interests while disregarding the equal rights of animals and disrupting the ecosystem.

### 3.1.2. Mass Burial Site: Undecomposable Bodies and Pollution

Anthropocentrism, in terms of our outlook on the natural world, is evident in the way we modify and exploit nature to serve human interests, fulfilling our needs for survival and progress. This perspective revolves around valuing human concerns and abilities, using anthropocentric thought to channel human ingenuity towards shaping and adapting the natural environment. Consequently, it has shifted humanity's position from being subordinate to and wholly reliant on nature, reshaping our connection with the natural world (Liu, 2005).

As the plague ravaged, the situation worsened, with the daily influx of corpses exceeding the capacity of local burial grounds in London. In just two weeks, 1114 bodies had been thrown into burial pits, which were now being hastily filled (Defoe, 1904). Defoe explicitly cites these numbers in the text, not only to illustrate the severity of the spreading plague but also to imply the environmental damage caused by the improper disposal of corpses. In their attempts to handle the increasing number of bodies, people began haphazardly digging pits for burial, without separating these areas from regular use, preventing the deceased from resting peacefully (Defoe, 1904). These corpses were disturbed, mistreated, and even exhumed, some so fresh that the flesh had not yet decomposed, treated like dung or garbage and moved elsewhere (Defoe, 1904). The casualties of the plague failed to evoke sorrow or awareness among the people; they disregarded the environmental pollution caused by the decomposition of bodies, let alone contemplating how to minimize the damage to the environment.

The indiscriminate burial of corpses during this period likened humans to the animals that were also being summarily disposed of. In a sense, it served as a form of "retribution" for humanity's reckless destruction of the natural world and indiscriminate killing of living beings. Engels wrote more than a century ago in his *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, "Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us" (Sun, 2007). The stark reality of widespread environmental pollution and ecological devastation today indicates that adhering to anthropocentric views presents a significant threat to human survival. Achieving a harmonious relationship between humans and nature is of paramount importance for both humanity and the future of the planet. Actually, our current understanding of the world suggests that humans are not the center of all things. Human perception and cognition are limited and fallible, our imagination is often constrained, and our management of resources is not always enlightened (Laszlo, 2004).

### 3.2. The Mental Ecological Imbalance during the Plague

Renowned contemporary Western philosopher Ervin Laszlo, in analyzing humanity's ecological dilemma, argues that the limits of survival lie not in the natural ecological environment of the Earth, but within humans themselves, in their attitudes towards life and choices of survival. He perceives that the greatest limitation of humanity is not external but internal. It is not the finite nature of the

Earth but the limitations of human will and understanding that hinder our evolution towards a better future (Laszlo, 2004). Not only can the destruction of the natural ecology destroy humanity, but the severe imbalance in human spiritual ecology can also lead to its destruction. Moreover, the consequences of imbalanced human spiritual ecology may far exceed those of imbalanced natural ecology (Shen, 2005). In the process of human evolution and development, the spirit plays a crucial role as a significant component of the ecological environment, its ecological value being paramount (Liu, 2003).

As the plague advanced, Londoners came to the realization that the government was incapable of managing the crisis, causing them to give up on resistance. Consequently, their mental well-being gradually deteriorated, and the darker facets of human nature started to emerge.

### 3.2.1. Alienated Human Nature

During this plague, beyond the physical anguish it inflicted, there was a profound impact on the mental well-being of individuals. Many, feeling devoid of any hope for recovery, succumbed to despair, initially at a psychological level, then exhibiting bizarre behaviors. Some mothers, in their mental turmoil, tragically ended the lives of their own children. Others perished not from any contagious ailment but from overwhelming grief. Some fell victim to sheer panic and confusion, despite not contracting any infectious disease. Moreover, there were those paralyzed by fear, descending into madness and irrationality, while others spiraled into hopelessness and psychological instability. Some became melancholic and frenzied (Defoe, 1904). Among the infected, facing imminent death, some became extremely agitated and frenzied. Draped in blankets or rough cloth, they hurled themselves into pits, claiming to bury themselves (Defoe, 1904). In their frantic terror, they engaged in countless inexplicable actions, much like others suffering from the disease and enduring unbearable pain, eliciting profound sympathy. Some wandered the streets, bellowing and weeping, clutching their hands tightly, while others turned to prayer, raising their hands to the sky, pleading for divine mercy (Defoe, 1904).

The abnormal behaviors of Londoners during the plague can generally be categorized into two types: those who, infected with the plague, felt hopeless and chose to end their lives, and those who, though not yet infected, succumbed to death due to overwhelming fear and anxiety. From these aberrant behaviors, it is evident that humanity, buoyed by the smooth sailing of industrial technological advancement for many years, had seen its adaptive capacity and confidence in resisting ecological crises rapidly expand. At the onset of the plague, there was a prevailing belief that humanity could control everything, but when it became apparent that this was not the case, mental equilibrium began to falter. The progress brought about by industrial development deeply ingrained anthropocentrism in the human psyche. However, as the plague unfolded, plunging people into immense panic, they found themselves overwhelmed by despair, madness, and ultimately succumbed to death.

The highly unified integration of sensibility and rationality, perception and thought, constitutes the complete and comprehensive “internal nature” of human beings (Wang, 2010). Perhaps, if people strictly adhere to the advice of doctors and scientists and rigorously implement isolation policies, there is still a glimmer of hope. However, when the citizens of London during the plague were unable to use rational thinking to concentrate their efforts on resisting the epidemic, tragedy became unavoidable. Before the plague posed a direct threat to their lives, the spiritual imbalance caused by panic and despair led to the loss of precious lives. Sometimes, the most terrifying aspect is that before the external ecological environment destroys humanity, humanity may have already destroyed itself spiritually. Therefore, protecting and restoring human spiritual ecology is an essential prerequisite for protecting the material ecological environment. Returning to nature begins with the return of human internal nature. Without achieving this primary task, a fully healthy environmental ecology will never be realized.

### 3.2.2. Humanity’s Mutual Slaughter

Apart from the breakdown and aberrant behavior faced during the plague, as the epidemic progressed, the darker aspects of human nature gradually became apparent. In the face of life and death, familial ties lost their significance as individuals prioritized the preservation of their own lives above all else. Some were willing to sacrifice the lives of their loved ones to ensure their own survival. If someone in their household became infected with the plague, others’ immediate instinct was to flee, abandoning the sick individual (Defoe, 1904). Furthermore, the isolation policies were implemented with extreme brutality; if one person contracted the plague, guards would simply lock up the entire family without conducting any screening. Consequently, both the uninfected and infected individuals were left to coexist, resulting in the eventual demise of everyone. Despite their desperate attempts to survive, those detained faced brutality and were left with no means of escape, resigned to their fate of perishing together (Defoe, 1904).

Moreover, there was a lack of mutual assistance and compassion among people. Many believed the plague to be a punishment from God, leading to exploitation by unscrupulous individuals posing as doctors and herbalists. They took advantage of people’s panic to peddle fake medicines, deceiving them for profit and leading them to seek ineffective treatments. Ironically, driven by fear, people put their faith in these charlatans and consumed medicines that actually prepared their bodies for the plague rather than protecting them from it (Defoe, 1904).

One of the reasons for the high casualties during the plague is some individuals focused on exploiting their fellow citizens for personal gain. As Defoe observes in the book:

*It was not the least of our misfortunes that with our infection, when it ceased, there did not cease the spirit of strife and contention, slander and reproach, which was re-*

*ally the great troubler of the nation's peace before. It was said to be the remains of the old animosities, which had so lately involved us all in blood and disorder* (Defoe, 1904).

Similar to the destruction of the natural ecological environment, the severe imbalance in human spiritual ecology can also lead to the destruction of humanity itself. While the life of animals is primarily a physiological process, human life, in addition to its physiological aspect, also involves a process of meaning. Beyond physiological life, humans have constructed a world of meaning. Humanity finds itself in a precarious and awkward situation, caught between the dual crises of ecological and spiritual imbalance. The disruption of human spiritual ecology has led to a severe imbalance, characterized by a loss of meaning in life and the erosion of spiritual values (Liu, 2003).

### **3.3. The Plague: Humanity's Relationship with Nature**

In China, there exists an ancient proverb: "Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it." This saying is commonly employed to depict the dynamics between rulers and their subjects, yet it equally encapsulates the intricate bond between humans and nature. While the bountiful resources of the natural world furnish humanity with comfort and security, natural disasters and ecological calamities relentlessly snatch away numerous lives. This serves as a poignant reminder for us to treat nature with reverence, understanding that human dominion is not absolute. Any acts of aggression against the natural world will inevitably recoil upon ourselves.

#### **3.3.1. The Departure of the Plague: Humanity Spared by Nature's Mercy**

Until the Great Fire of London destroyed much of the city center on September 2, 1666, lasting for four days and four nights, even engulfing London's landmark St. Paul's Cathedral, roughly around the same time, the plague also vanished completely. The plague took away many lives, while a great fire could save many lives. Nature itself is powerful, and we should maintain a sense of awe and reverence towards it.

As Marx pointed out, humans rely on the natural world for their existence. This means that nature is the body of humanity, with which humans must continually interact in order to avoid death. The so-called connection between human physical and spiritual life and the natural world is tantamount to saying that the natural world is connected to itself, because humans are part of nature. It is important to understand that humans are not the measure of all things; human cognitive abilities are very limited. Moreover, our understanding of nature and its laws must be tested through human activities of knowing and transforming nature, namely, through practice. Humans are just one species among many living beings; we stand on the earth not as conquerors but as recipients of its support. We exist beneath the sky not as sustainers but as recipients of its envelopment. It is essential to recognize that the natural world is an organic whole;

all natural entities have their own intrinsic value and the right to exist. We have only one Earth; we borrow it from future generations. To mitigate ecological crises, we must start with ourselves and consciously develop ecological awareness. The conscious internalization and formation of ecological awareness is the fundamental project for alleviating ecological crises.

### 3.3.2. Shift in Beliefs: Humanity's Humble Place in the World

After this epidemic, people began to succumb to their fear, believing that all regulations and measures were in vain, and that nothing could be relied upon except for desolation and barrenness under the sky. It was precisely at this unprecedented peak of universal despair that God, satisfied, halted His hand, just as He had begun it in that unexpected manner, even mitigating the fierceness of the epidemic (Defoe, 1904). Throughout the epidemic, there were fluctuations, and the rate of growth slowed down, but it was not due to people's scientific preventive measures or their own physical fitness. Additionally, with winter arriving quickly, the air became clear and cold, with several piercing frosts. Yet, despite this situation, the majority of those who fell ill recovered, and the city's health began to improve (Defoe, 1904).

At this point, people truly realize that nature is not merely an object for human exploitation. When nature can no longer endure human plunder and devastation, humanity faces ecological crises. It hangs over humanity like the sword of Damocles, threatening the survival of the entire human race (Wang, 2010). Humans and other organisms are interdependent with the natural world. As a complete system, humanity's attitude towards nature is also its attitude towards itself. What humans do to nature is akin to what they do to themselves; the harm inflicted upon nature is a harm inflicted upon themselves. Therefore, protecting the interests of biodiversity and the natural world is tantamount to safeguarding the conditions for human survival and protecting human interests.

## 4. Conclusion

Defoe, through his masterful realism, vividly portrays the scenes of the Great Plague of London in 1655. In an era marked by frequent global ecological crises, interpreting works like this, which contain ecological reflections, holds significant importance. By reevaluating *A Journal of the Plague Year* from an ecological criticism perspective, we can unearth the ecological awareness and wisdom embedded within the work, critique actions permeated with anthropocentrism, and guide people to cultivate ecological consciousness. Recognizing humanity's place in nature, understanding that humans are part of the natural world, and acknowledging that human survival and development are inseparable from nature are crucial steps toward fostering ecological awareness. For future studies, it is highly suggested that interdisciplinary studies could explore similar themes found in other literary works or historical periods, deepening our understanding of human-environment interactions. For instance, examining how other epidemics or natural disasters are depicted in literature from various cultures and

time periods could provide insights into different societal responses to environmental crises. Additionally, comparative analyses between Defoe's work and contemporary fiction or non-fiction accounts of environmental challenges could highlight evolving perspectives on ecological issues.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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