

# On the Human Character of Disaster Narratives: Using *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Defoe and *The Painted Veil* by Maugham as Examples

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## Abstract

This study examines the paradoxical duality of human nature and the triadic tension found in disaster narratives through *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Painted Veil*. This is done by applying Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and so on. The research focuses on the ontological metamorphosis of human nature, from its decline to sublimation, and employs three major innovations in methodology, research perspective, and cross-era comparison. It emphasizes that the social function of disaster literature has shifted from collective admonition to individual awakening. This reflects the dialectical interplay of human nature in extreme situations and offers valuable insights for anthropological reconstruction in the post-epidemic era.

## Keywords

*A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Painted Veil*, Human Nature, Disaster Narratives

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background and Problem Formulation

Disasters have left an indelible mark on our lives, be it in the distant feudal past or the advanced and open present. Though people may seem small, in the process of combating disasters, they still manage to radiate a brilliant light, revealing the indomitable spirit and boundless potential within them.

From the COVID-19 Epidemic in Wuhan in 2019 to the prevention and treatment of the influenza A virus in 2025, which threatens to cause a global pandemic, and from the Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan in 2008 to the earthquake in Xi-

zang in 2025, numerous tragedies have forced people to unite and fight for survival. Our focus is not on the tragedies themselves but on the manifestations of human character during these events. Many literary works document every aspect of the people and events involved in the disaster process. Each person is unique; some resort to stealing from others, while others display remarkable bravery and selflessness. They make diverse moral choices. However, as human civilization advances, we strive to uphold the value of every individual's life and encourage self-redemption, which is the spiritual strength that literature embodies.

After a catastrophic event, fear and inquiry coexist. How should we approach such events? How can we explore human character in disasters? In diverse historical contexts, how do disaster narratives by different writers show the universality and diversity of human nature? To answer these questions, we must first understand the core of the numerous events revealed in the disaster, which is the expression of the essence of humanity. Humans are complex. When an unforeseen event disrupts the peace and creates fear of the unknown, each person's behavior reflects their deepest wishes.

When faced with various crises, some people demonstrate selfless dedication, taking the epidemic as an example: resisting the epidemic process, Zhong Nanshan led the team to fight for time and clinical treatment tasks while conducting scientific research, leading the development of new crown pneumonia emergency clinical trial projects 41, published 63 SCI articles in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and other authoritative journals, authorized 10 patents, led the completion of the new crown pneumonia-related disease guidelines 4, edited the new crown pneumonia-related treatise (Li & Zhong, 2025: p. 2). How could Walter in *The Painted Veil* not be such a person? Nevertheless, at the same time, fear and dread filled the hearts of most people, creating chaos. Like the crowds that looted supplies during the plague, order collapsed as rumors swirled. The absence of social rules adds to the emergence of evil, making virtuous people more visible and terrible villains more prevalent. What we need is not a romanticizing catastrophe but for everyone to wring their hands and weather the storm together. What we need is warm literature that will awaken people's consciences and provide spiritual peace while also fostering global disaster consciousness to disaster prevention.

A contrast between the righteous and the evil gradually emerges from the textual dialectic. Analyzing these two types of characters in the work encourages reflection on the balance of values between the individual and society, leading to a better understanding of the connection between the "small self" and the "big self." Along with the examination of human nature expressed in the calamity, it is a phenomenological elevation from the flat to the three-dimensional, enriching the spiritual world and creating a win-win situation for both the author and the readers.

We enjoy reviewing and summarizing events. After an unforeseen event, we should enhance our social policies and mechanisms for protection. While analyzing human characteristics, we should also emphasize humanistic care and pro-

mote the value of life and existence.

## 1.2. Literature Review

Currently, in disaster narrative studies, scholars typically employ methods like textual analysis, comparison, and cultural or socio-historical research to examine one or multiple works as a whole. For instance, in her 2024 master's thesis, "A Study of Disaster Writing in Yan Lianke's Novels," Wenjing Luo analyzes various disaster themes to investigate artistic expressions and values. Similarly, in 2024, Zhicai Zhang delves into the reflection and care in the modes of disaster narratives and narrative methods in "Disaster Narratives in the Novels of Don DeLillo."

In addition, in his 2022 master's thesis, "A Comparative Study of *Plague* and *White Snow Crow* in the Perspective of 'Disaster Literature'," Junli Qu compares and contrasts the similarities and differences in their narrative frameworks and aesthetic implications. Haiyan Yuan, in 2023, examines disaster awareness in "Disaster Narrative in Makoto Shinkai's *Bellbu's Journey*," exploring how emotions and reflections drive people forward into the future. Many scholars have analyzed the patterns, characteristics, and reflections of disaster narratives in various related literary works from different perspectives. Numerous studies have focused on the instincts, mutual aid, and moral choices of individuals in the face of disaster, as well as the fearlessness and complexity of groups in such situations.

Many researchers in disaster literature studies have focused on the nuanced continuum of human writing and ethical paradoxes. From the sublime to the corrupt, from dedication to selfishness, human civilization is a dialectical loom woven from diverse individuals.

Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (2003) has been studied both domestically and internationally, but from different angles. According to Dai (2023), most research focuses on background material without assessing details, resulting in fragmented and unstructured analyses. Few studies examine the book from multiple perspectives, such as politics, religion, and morality. Moreover, there is a lack of axiological evaluation and ethical consideration, with research approaches emphasizing narrative techniques and political issues while neglecting literary characterization (Dai, 2023: pp. 6-9). According to Xiang's (2024) dissertation, most academics at home and abroad have interpreted Maugham's *The Painted Veil* through the lenses of Orientalism and postcolonialism, with few analyses exploring the theme of gendered maturation trajectory during disasters (Xiang, 2024: p. 9).

Even fewer scholars have attempted a comparative analysis of both texts, and the exploration of the complexities of human nature is still insufficient, resulting in a rather one-dimensional comparison.

## 1.3. Research Theory and Methodology

This research is grounded in three main theories. The first is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943), which categorizes human needs into five levels, from

lower to higher: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Physiological needs are the most fundamental in the hierarchy of human requirements. When confronted with crises like plagues and cholera, individuals are compelled to venture out to procure resources essential for survival. This underscores that the paramount human desire is to maintain existence. Only after these basic physiological needs are satisfied can people allocate time and energy to pursue social stability and health protection, fulfilling their safety needs. Once these are met, individuals then strive to attain a sense of belonging and emotional connection within their family units. For instance, during the plague outbreaks in London, people fled the stricken city with their families in search of a new home where they could find the acceptance and love needed to satisfy their belongingness requirements. As social beings, people rely on the emotional backing of family and friends. In *The Painted Veil*, Katie returns to her mother's home after her husband's death, aiming to be with her father and secure a good life for her unborn child. These actions indicate individuals' pursuit of higher-level needs once basic ones are met. Some, like the paramedics Walter and Katie, gain others' respect by saving lives during the epidemic. However, few attain the highest self-actualization needs. Katie, though, finds self-worth, achieves personal growth, and handles love better, marking her inner change.

The second is the Jungian Collective Unconscious, a universal spiritual content embedded in everyone's subconscious through heredity, comprising mainly instincts and archetypes. Archetypes are inherited psychological patterns, while instincts are inherited physiological patterns. The Jungian Collective Unconscious reveals universal human patterns in disaster narratives through archetypal analysis, which examines how they reflect human beings' shared subconscious content, revealing the text's deeper universal themes and the common psychological experience of humans. The plague and cholera, as classic emblems of death and devastation, represent the collective terror and despair of humanity when facing disasters. This is a psychological pattern shared across the collective unconscious of people, potentially revealing crucial human characteristics. The Londoners' use of religious narratives to ward off the plague, alongside Katie's horror at encountering corpses, exemplifies fundamental human emotions. Nevertheless, the tireless nuns dedicated to saving the afflicted and the selfless Walter stand as radiant role models. This clash of contrasts invites profound reflection on the underlying theme.

The third is narrative ethics, which explores the importance of narratives in morality. This approach emphasizes the content of stories to understand and think about moral issues, helping individuals create meaning from concrete life stories and enhancing their moral sense and value judgment.

Simultaneously, we employ textual close reading and comparative analysis in our investigation. By analyzing and comparing *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Painted Veil*, along with exploring their similarities and differences, we can

better understand the persistent humanistic attitudes and beliefs about life in both tragedies. Moreover, we delve into the text and its details, focusing on the essence of human nature as portrayed in the story and striving to grasp its civilizational imaginaries. We also examine the subtextual psychodynamics of the primary characters, as well as the author's creative psychology, to interpret the genuine emotions driving the characters' actions.

In disaster literature, civilizational imaginary is a narrative approach that frames a specific civilization or society's response to catastrophic crises. Authors employ this method to convey essential values, ethical frameworks, man-nature relationships, and future expectations of civilization to readers. Within plague chronicles, the social order in London often rapidly disintegrates when confronted with epidemic outbreaks. During such crises, charlatans frequently exploit the chaos for personal gain, while healthcare workers remain resolute in their duties, highlighting the contrasting human behaviors that emerge in the face of disaster. In the aftermath of calamities, individuals propagate superstitions and rumors in pursuit of spiritual solace, illustrating how civilizations are sustained and perpetuated. In *The Painted Veil*, Katie's journey with her husband to Hong Kong region and then to Mae Ta Foo exposes her to cultural collisions. This experience prompts her to reflect on her ideals and moral code, yielding personal development. The cross-cultural narrative also offers readers insight into how different civilizations handle disasters and their respective beliefs. Admittedly, during the narrative process, the author incorporates her thoughts and creativity to deepen readers' understanding of the story's underlying meaning. Analyzing the storyline and scrutinizing the author's speech are crucial for comparing different literary works.

## 2. Overview

### 2.1. Introduction to Disaster Narratives

Throughout history, words have served as a means of transmission, and many writers in the realm of literature have contemplated the relationship between disasters and humans, gradually giving rise to the concept of "disaster literature." Disaster literature uses language and art to present the life events, survival phenomena, and life existence of human beings who have suffered as a result of nature's experience and perception of violently destroying human civilization and individual life at an unanticipated time and place, as well as to reproduce nature's sudden outbursts of violent storms, landslides, and broken walls, and to express the tragedy of human beings in the face of natural ravages. It is to recreate the unexpected outbreak of nature's powerful storms, the form of mountains falling, and the tragic condition of destroyed walls, and to represent human people's terror and confusion in front of the ravages of nature, the grief of sorrow, and the rational spirit of contemplating over the pains (Fan, 2014: p. 159).

There has been a wealth of publications on disaster narratives abroad. In 1719, Defoe created the renowned *Robinson Crusoe*, which depicts Robinson's arduous

journey home after living on a desert island for more than a decade, presenting a noble image of heroism and fortitude. In 1826, Mary Shelley published *The Last Man*, a modern post-apocalyptic fiction that reflected on civilization and human nature. In 1947, Albert Camus used *The Plague* as a metaphor for war to explore existentialist resistance and collective destiny. Preston published *The Blood Plague* in 2016, which explores the relationship between humans and the environment, as well as solutions to the infection. While the research is fruitful, it primarily focuses on fictional literature rather than documentaries. It concentrates mainly on the process of disaster outbreaks and resistance, overlooking discussions of disaster restoration and trauma relief.

In China, Qian Gang authored a report on the Tangshan Earthquake in 1986, offering a panoramic view of the catastrophe site and rescue efforts. Yu Hua's *Alive* (1993) documented farmer Fugui's experiences with civil war, starvation, and other tragedies of the time, interspersing horrific memories with his personal destiny. Chi Zijian's *Snow Crow* (2010) highlighted people's struggles during a calamity, showcasing the bright and terrible sides of human nature. A Lai's *A Memoir in the Clouds* (2019) explored the restorative power of disaster memory and traditional culture following the Wenchuan earthquake. Domestic sci-fi disaster scenarios began later and possessed fewer political overtones than their Western counterparts. The degree of typology was minimal, with fewer genuine disaster novels and a greater reliance on history or modernist literature.

## 2.2. Relevant Studies on Human Characteristics

After a long evolutionary history, humans have evolved into the complex, intelligent creatures that we are today. Human character in literature is a concept of infinite complexity and diversity. People, as complex individuals, are rarely simply good or bad. Humans possess a vast spectrum of complex emotions, so it is crucial to analyze literary characters from multiple perspectives.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) demonstrated the strange coexistence of intellect and madness, retribution and morality in human nature. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) showed Heathcliff's love-hate relationship with Catherine. Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) portrayed humanity's moral struggle for repentance and redemption. Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) highlighted the ferocious savagery hidden beneath the veneer of civilization, metaphorically representing the depravity of human nature as the ultimate tragedy. All of these works examine human nature and attempt to expose its complex and changing character. However, there is insufficient multidisciplinary integration, and the research is shallow as it has long been trapped in the dichotomy of the doctrine of good and evil.

In 1939, Lao She's *Camel Xiangzi* depicted a humble car driver who became a walking corpse after being baptized by the darkness of society, vividly portraying the struggle and despair of the characters at the bottom of the hierarchy. Yu Hua's *Alive* (1993) explored the tenacity of human nature and the significance of sur-

vival amidst tremendous suffering, questioning the essence of the meaning of “life”. Mo Yan’s *Sandalwood Torture* (2001) highlighted the ruin of human nature caused by power brutality, while Yu Hua’s *The City of Letters* (2021) depicted the goodness of human nature amidst banditry and unrest, reconstructing the spectrum of human nature amid historical splits. However, the study suffers from poor conceptualization, a single-gender perspective, excessive moralism, and a failure to fully appreciate the complexity of human nature.

Human development is closely linked to society, where human characteristics are more distinctly expressed. In Yu Hua’s *Alive*, Feng Xia suffers from starvation and eventually dies of postpartum hemorrhage. Fugui’s family struggles to survive during the famine, and the lack of food puts their lives in jeopardy, making it difficult for them to sustain even the most basic level of sustenance. This famine narrative not only portrays the survival problem of ordinary people at the time but also vividly represents the fragility and helplessness of existence in the flood of the times, further increasing the reflection on the meaning of life.

### **3. Dual Dimensions of Disaster Narratives: Historical Reality and Fictional Expression**

#### **3.1. The Pseudo-Documentary Strategy of a Journal of the Plague Year**

In his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth developed the concept of the Unreliable Narrator, which refers to a narrator who delivers information, opinions, or interpretations that are not credible and contradict objective facts or the work’s indicated authorial viewpoint. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe deliberately obscures the identity of the narrator, who refers to himself as “Mr. H.F.” and whose full name is revealed only once at the end of the book. He selectively describes events that correspond to his own beliefs and experiences, omitting many other crucial aspects. In presenting his characters, “H.F.” frequently employs class bias and stereotyping. For example, while describing some impoverished people who steal because they are hungry, he feels that their poverty is primarily due to their laziness and ignores their predicament.

Behind this anonymous narrative, group instincts and the deconstruction of the theocracy are embodied. The clergy refused to pray for the people and were only concerned with hiding from the plague. Priests also fled their posts, and all church activities were canceled. A network of mutual aid was formed among civilians. After proving their health to one another, people begin to assist one another. In describing the “Three Stooges,” Defoe devotes a great deal of space to recording the helpful behavior of the gentlemen. But in the end, they were broken up by the plague. Sun (2023) highly commends the skillful manipulation of perspective, stating that “This merging of empirical and narrative viewpoints enables the work to strike a balance between sensitivity and rationality, avoiding the extremes of sensationalism and didacticism, thus achieving a complementary effect” (Sun, 2023: p. 28).

This incisive observation stimulates reflection on the nature of the disease and the characteristics of humans. For the residents besieged by existential despair of self-abandonment, this desperate situation acts like a psychosocial catalyst, stirring up latent atavistic impulses or tendencies within them. It fuels their hatred toward their fellow human beings, driving them to weaponize kinship betrayal indiscriminately and plunge the entire city into an even fractal network of mistrust. Many confidence schemers took advantage of the situation to defraud people, while self-proclaimed deities offered miraculous remedies and miraculous panaceas.

The narrator claims, “I record only what I see with my eyes.” This false objectivity suggests an ideological critique (Sun, 2023), yet this anonymous narrative brims with subjectivity, such as in depicting the tragedy of the marketplace. The afflicted, tormented by the lumps’ pain, dashed into the streets in self-loathing, fearing to infect others. The poor and women were forced to enter open doors in search of anything they could get. Many lost loved ones and friends, and even though “there was no sign of any contagious disease in the body, except that it had sunk under the weight of the mourning” (Xu & Wei, 2023: p. 181), they also perished.

### 3.2. The Metaphorical Disaster Writing of *The Painted Veil*

In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham conveys the concept of disaster through several metaphors.

The cholera epidemic is one such metaphor, representing both catharsis and revulsion. The cholera-ravaged Mae Taeng Province is seen as a place of death that everyone discusses. When Katie heard her husband say they were going there together, she panicked. “Suicide. It was nothing short of that. Dreadful! (...) It was cruel”, she said to Walter. “Please don’t, Walter. It would be too awful if something happened, supposing you died?” (Maugham, 2001: p. 55). But Katie’s experience volunteering in the epidemic area enabled her to undergo a spiritual catharsis, where she “felt truly alive for the first time,” acknowledged her own folly, and achieved inner redemption. The cholera outbreak, on the other hand, which struck the Eastern countries, provided an opportunity for people to break free from colonial identity constraints and purify the spiritual realm.

The terrifying aspect of a communicable disease disaster is that people are often unaware of and unfamiliar with it. The fear of the unknown can be so overwhelming that when Katie first saw the body of a beggar, she shook violently. As Zhao (2022) opined, there are several reasons why people view cholera as a disease metaphor.

“The elusive and unfamiliar nature of cholera greatly magnifies its aura of mystery, which is one of the key factors in the proliferation of infectious disease metaphors. When people live under the constant shadow of plague but can’t fully grasp or vanquish it, they tend to understand it in non-scientific terms. That is, they draw connections between it and other things, perceiving it as a calamity

inflicted on humanity by the evil plague deity.” (p. 33)

The metaphor of the veil is a powerful symbol in *The Painted Veil*. Cholera lifts the veil of love, revealing its true nature. In the face of tragedy, Townsend sacrifices Katie for his own destiny without hesitation, yet Katie continues to struggle and suffer. Despite seeing the decay beneath Townsend’s seemingly perfect exterior, she remains helplessly in love with him. However, cholera also lifts the veil, allowing Katie to escape her illusions. She lets go of her vanities and delusions and confronts reality and choices head-on, marking a psychological transition from being caught up in love affairs to realizing a woman’s freedom and independence. Katie chooses a “path to inner peace” (Maugham, 2016: p. 253). Additionally, the veil serves as a cover for the colonizer’s exploitation. Colonists congregated in that saloon, sipping whiskey from silver goblets and talking about the Shanghai stock market, completely unaware of the Chinese waiter bringing tea. (Maugham, 2016: p. 135). The arrogance of the colonizer in discussing indigenous hygiene practices in the Hong Kong region salon contrasts with the corpses in Mae Taeng Province, satirizing the corruption of their moral system.

In disaster narratives, metaphor functions as a rhetorical tool and an ideological vehicle. It transforms a physical calamity into a social crisis, cutting right to the heart of human nature. In *The Painted Veil*, cholera is both a calamity and a symbol of the moral corruption of colonial society. Metaphors can also help us understand disaster images from various perspectives, including politics and ethics. For example, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the looting by Londoners can be seen as both a survival instinct and a reflection of capitalist materialistic logic.

## **4. The Spectrum of Humanity in Disaster: Survival Instinct, Moral Choice, and Transcendence**

### **4.1. Primitive Humanity Driven by Survival Instincts**

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, London seemed to be witnessing the end of the world. In the face of disaster, the dual aspects of human nature became apparent. Some people acted selfishly in order to survive. For example, avaricious drug traffickers hoarded supplies and hiked prices, making blood-tainted money without a hint of guilt. The plague spread so swiftly that all aspects of life came to an abrupt halt. The impoverished lost their jobs, and their bread supply was cut off. Meanwhile, the wealthy fled to other locations with their belongings. The survival instinct drove everyone to abandon the gentle politeness of normal life.

Simultaneously, human inherent avarice and opportunistic proclivities are laid bare. When the political system collapsed, the competition for bread and medicine was no longer regulated by the contractual laws of daily society but rather by resource competition logic, leading to a primordial struggle for resource acquisition. Among the various people assessing the situation, the trio pretending to be an army and intimidating others, the merchants hoarding supplies, and the secular dealings of the body-snatchers all exemplify how rational thinking, under the discipline of civilization, can be reduced to a survival transaction tool. Xu Jiahe makes a similar

point, noting that this groupthink myth, fueled by blind compliance, was crystallized in Londoners' excessive passion for doomsday visions (Xu & Wei, 2023: p. 61).

When confronted with information that conflicts with their existing beliefs or perceptions, individuals often experience an uncomfortable psychological state known as Cognitive Dissonance. To resolve this mental discomfort, people may adjust their thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors to align with their belief systems, thereby restoring a sense of cognitive harmony. To dispel their fears, people proliferate apocalyptic rumors to conduct collective psychological manipulation. Some individuals' minds were consumed by various psychosomatic manifestations. While others expressed their anxieties about life and death, they all claimed to have seen angels with swords in the sky and ghosts in the graveyard. This self-deceptive rationalization may aim to restore psychological equilibrium by allaying anxieties and persuading others of impending catastrophe, thereby deriving psychological comfort. Coupled with this credulous mindset is pronounced herd behavior, wherein heightened panic could readily escalate into collective unrest, precipitating repercussions of unforeseeable magnitude.

In *The Painted Veil*, there are two distinct facets of humanity. Amid the cholera-induced desperation, the French nuns cast off the trappings of their colonial identity and exercised their biopolitical agency, clearly showing their readiness to contribute. In contrast, the group of colonial bureaucrats, despite their apathy, represents an increasingly corrupt transfer of power. The spatial juxtaposition of exquisite teacups and teaspoons in afternoon tea and decaying corpses in cholera demonstrates civilized society's moral superiority.

Together, the two works reveal the paradoxical characteristics of the survival instinct: as the citizens of London fight to the death for the food stored in the cellar, their biological imperatives accelerate the group's destruction; the Convent Sisters, in their self-devotion to the meaning of survival, unintentionally maximize the value of each life.

#### 4.2. Ethical Choices in Moral Dilemmas

Extreme existential crises precipitate moral polarization in human behavior, a phenomenon starkly illustrated in Defoe's pandemic narrative. The text exposes how survival imperatives corrode ethical frameworks through two primary manifestations.

**Capitalist Exploitation.** Profit-driven merchants subvert humanitarian principles by weaponizing scarcity. Their monopolization of vital supplies—particularly protective masks and medications—constitutes a perversion of market mechanisms. As Defoe observes, “the danger of immediate death to ourselves took away all bonds of love, all concern for one another” (Defoe, 2003: p. 134), enabling pharmaceutical conglomerates to implement predatory pricing strategies that privilege profit over civic welfare.

**Medical Charlatanism.** Opportunistic practitioners exploit collective vulnera-

bility through pseudoscientific claims. The “barefoot doctors” peddling placebo remedies exemplify what Goffman termed “confidence games” in crisis contexts. A paradigmatic episode involves a fraudulent physician administering toxic herbal concoctions to silence dissent—an act combining medical malpractice with psychological manipulation.

These behavioral patterns demonstrate the Hobbesian paradox of rational self-interest: individual survival strategies that collectively accelerate societal disintegration. The merchants’ supply chain manipulation and quack doctors’ therapeutic theatrics ultimately constitute thanatological practices—biopower exercised through calculated indifference to communal wellbeing.

In *The Painted Veil*, the selflessness of Walter, the doctor who takes the initiative to venture deep into the disaster zone to cure and save people, is an ethical transcendence. Notably, his commendable decision is not entirely selfless, as it is intertwined with a quest for meaning. “Walter’s extreme self-sacrifice resembles Jesus’ willingness to suffer for the world; he becomes the lamb who suffers for Katie, helping her find her way back” (Kang, 2023: p. 124). Bauman underlines that Responsibility for the Other is an absolute moral responsibility that goes beyond utilitarianism. It is motivated by compassion, care, and respect for the other, rather than personal gain or profit. Walter faced an extraordinarily high risk of infection and death in the cholera-affected area, but instead of giving up, he fearlessly confronted death and continued his task. This fearlessness in the face of death symbolizes his moral strength in accepting responsibility for others. Walter’s courage as a biologist in confronting the cholera epidemic earns him widespread admiration and Katie’s respect.

These opposed behavioral paradigms unveil distinct psychomoral mechanisms. The moral desensitization of the businessman starts with the abstraction of concrete persons into numbers and progresses to emotional indifference through repeated profit-making practices involving hoarding. Conversely, Walter is carrying out his responsibilities as a healer, compensating for moral deficits through noble behavior, and ultimately establishing altruistic behavior. This behavioral dichotomy ultimately deconstructs essentialist notions of human nature, revealing instead a dialectical continuum where environmental catalysts precipitate moral metamorphosis—not unlike electrolytic solutions undergoing phase transitions under thermodynamic stress.

### **4.3. The Path of Realizing Transcendence of Human Nature**

Using pseudo-documentary narrative strategies, Defoe depicts people’s desperate soteriological anxiety in calamity. The epidemic is viewed as divine retributive justice for human sin, and survivors seek salvation through repentance and prayer. Li & Li (2023) interpret the plague as punishment and vengeance, stating, “God is punishing the immoral, a stigmatizing attribution that leaves most believers with a heavy moral burden” (Li & Li, 2023: p. 114). The book talks about how churches held frequent prayer services during the plague. Despite the pandemic,

church bells rang. People wanted to pray to appease God's anger and rid themselves of the scourge.

During the plague, some houses were marked as infected by red crosses painted on the doors and the words "May God have mercy on us" written on them. These symbols served both as a warning and a reflection of people's faith in God. During such times of upheaval, soothsayers spread superstitions, claiming to predict the disease's spread or offer cures. However, these empty promises proved false, intensifying people's fear and sorrow.

Maugham explores the possibility of secular awakening through Katie's development. Initially, Katie is indecisive, but as she ages, she settles for Walter. She marries him to maintain social appearances, following societal norms despite the lack of love. When Katie is compelled to accompany her husband to the cholera-stricken area, confronting death, moral dilemmas, and others' sacrifices awakens her spiritually. Instead of relying on religious or social doctrines, she evolves from vanity to introspection by confronting her pain, accepting responsibility, and contemplating her desires. This transformation stems not from divine intervention but from her active pursuit of life's meaning. "It is in times of trouble that one discovers one's true self, as Sartre said, choose what you really want, and let these trials and tribulations build a unique self" (Zhang, 2024: p. 64).

Despite their divergent routes, both works ultimately demonstrate the complexity and persistence of human nature. *A Journal of the Plague Year* emphasizes religious redemption that sanctifies suffering, while *The Painted Veil* focuses on secular enlightenment that transforms anguish into growth. This difference not only enhances the depth and breadth of disaster literature but also serves as a reminder that the quest for the meaning of existence is an enduring human pursuit, whether we seek answers in the divine or through self-exploration.

## 5. Differences in Human Nature Writing and Their Cultural Roots in Comparative Perspective

### 5.1. The Collision of Enlightenment Reason and Existentialism

Defoe uses various actuarial tables and mortality registers in his story to heighten the persuasiveness and epidemiological verisimilitude of the facts, such as the death-figure table. The use of concrete numbers reflects a focus on reality in the pursuit of ideals. The narrator notes that while the government has taken steps like quarantine and house-sealing, these have failed to control the plague and have instead increased public panic. Some people overpowered the guards and fled into the streets, spreading the illness through their abandonment. This reflects the Enlightenment-era questioning and criticism of authority. This challenge to authority can be linked to Freud's Notion of Personality Structure. In this framework, the id is the primitive component that seeks pleasure while avoiding pain. When people's lives are threatened by a plague, the id's survival instincts kick in, urging individuals to take action to protect themselves, even if it means defying societal conventions and state mandates. In this circumstance, people's behavior is pri-

marily driven by the id, and the moral restraints of the superego may be temporarily suspended. So, with the collapse of order, humans devolve into primitive competition for resources, and survival of the fittest becomes commonplace.

When confronted with the plague, Londoners sought redemption through prayer while also implementing practical measures such as quarantine and death statistics. “Those salutary reflections will drive mankind to their knees in joy, confessing their faults, looking up to their loving Savior for forgiveness, and imploring His mercy in this hour of misery and tragedy (Xu & Wei, 2023: p. 163).” Not only that, but Fook praised the government for some of the initiatives put in place during the epidemic, such as issuing passes and health certificates to prevent people from moving, issuing daily Death Tables to keep the public informed of the situation, prohibiting unjustified gatherings, and closing down entertainment venues (Sun, 2023: p. 28). This narrative of “faith and action in parallel” depicts the integration of Puritan ideals into secular life. Human virtue is portrayed as the fulfillment of duty, and the protagonist records the plague as a warning to future generations. Survival during the pandemic is depicted as both a divine test and a triumph of human reason and order.

Maugham illustrates the existentialist conundrum of existence through Katie’s awakening: When the “veil” of religion, love, and social conventions is lifted, the world becomes fundamentally meaningless. Katie finally achieves true freedom after witnessing the nuns’ devotion, her husband’s death, and her lover’s hypocrisy during the cholera outbreak. This reflection aligns with post-war nihilism: There is no God to provide meaning, and human existence precedes essence. Yet, instead of succumbing to despair, Maugham enables Katie to be reborn in nothingness. I want to raise my daughter and give her the freedom to stand on her own two feet (Maugham, 2016: p. 252). This emphasis on self-creation aligns with existentialism’s core tenet, which is “the active giving of meaning amid meaninglessness.”

The contrast between Defoe and Maugham embodies the eternal conflict in human perceptions of destiny. Enlightenment reason seeks to legislate for the world, while existentialism plunges humanity into the abyss of freedom. Amid constant inquiry and searching, man must discover his ultimate significance.

## 5.2. Changes in Social Functions of Disaster Narratives

In the 18th century, disasters like the plague were often seen through a “theodicean lens,” with the story’s core cautioning the world to respect divine order and stick to ethical conformity. Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* looks into the impact of social ties on the novel’s formation during the mid-Enlightenment era of the 18th century, exploring how literature turned disaster into a tool of moral guidance for religious authority and cultural hegemony.

In Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, the citizens’ avarice and hypocrisy drove the disaster’s spread, making repentance and prayer the only way to salvation. This reinforced the “sin and punishment” logic in Puritan ethics and tried to build societal consensus through fear. The novel constantly reminds read-

ers that the epidemic is recorded as a warning to future generations.

In 1826, Shelley's *The Last Man* emerged. It examines the novel's plot and characterization by focusing on the changing nature of human nature in the aftermath of a calamity, as well as the role of water imagery. Shelley's perspective as the last survivor hints at the fragility of human nature in the face of calamity, as well as observations on science at the start of the Industrial Revolution. The book explains how nineteenth-century disaster literature evolved from religious exhortation to a critique of scientific civilization.

"The Western plague narrative model has undergone another transformation since the 20th century. In Western literature, the plague is no longer objectively depicted but has become an allegorical symbol of modern social metaphors" (Chai, 2024: p. 36). In *The Painted Veil* in 1925, cholera has lost its religious connotations. Social instability and value shifting in the postwar period prompted people to question old moral and social norms. Katie seeks passion and love in her extramarital romance but finally sees the futility and irresponsibility of such an act, while Walter punishes Katie in a severe manner, which also violates traditional moral conventions. Katie's disillusionment and growth in the contaminated area reflect modern people's existential dilemma: how to confront life's absurdity and define self-worth when grand narratives like God, country, and love collapse. Katie manages to pull herself out of this low point. Deeply moved by the sisters' selfless care for the sick and orphans in the convent, she starts to reassess her own life and values. Instead of retreating in fear of cholera's brutality, she discovers inner joy and peace by serving others and working on herself. Upon returning to Hong Kong region, Katie reunites with Charlie but no longer feels drawn to him. She decides to start afresh with her father, showing her growing emotional independence and inner strength. Katie learns to draw strength from challenging circumstances and becomes resolved to raise her children to be self-sufficient in the world. Through these experiences, she transforms from a superficial woman into a conscientious and purposeful individual. Disaster catalyzes individual awakening, shifting society's role from "regulating group behavior" to "stimulating the individual's pursuit of freedom." Existentialist philosophy is founded on the concept of freedom, which is defined as man's ability to choose to behave according to his own will and to account for the motivations behind his acts (Mao, 2023: p. 52).

The social role of disaster literature evolved from "maintaining order through fear" in the eighteenth century to "awakening freedom through pain" in the twentieth century. However, this evolution is not linear but reflects changing views on human nature over time. Disaster narratives often have a dual-edged effect. They expose civilization's fragility while also highlighting humanity's resilience.

## **6. Relevance: The Implications of Disaster Narratives for Contemporary Society**

### **6.1. The Humanized Dimension of Crisis Management**

The official response to the plague is vividly documented in *A Journal of the*

*Plague Year*, notably in attempts to disseminate information. The government sought to stabilize the population by tallying deaths and issuing epidemic warnings, but the slow transmission of facts contradicted the public's panic. "Disease is one of life's biggest miseries, both in the past and in the present; yet, the larger calamities caused by the epidemic are loneliness and a crisis of confidence between man and man" (Wang, 2021: p. 27).

For example, Mr. H.F. insisted on capturing the actual data, only to find that many fell into conspiracy theories as the information was disguised. This shows the limitations of rationality: simply disclosing data may increase group fear if it lacks emotional resonance and communication trust. In the novel, church bells, group prayers, and burial customs serve as outlets for people's emotional outpourings, though they are ultimately passive forms of appeasement.

In contrast, the cholera zone in *The Painted Veil* presents another community model: the selflessness of the nuns, Dr. Walter's scientific spirit, and Katie's growing sense of responsibility create a "secular support network." When Katie washes orphans' clothes and helps with their medical care, she not only serves others but also rebuilds her self-worth. This shift from "divine dependence" to "humanity activation" reveals that the significance of community lies not in shared beliefs but in gaining individual subjectivity through mutual aid. This "secular support network" provided Katie with emotional and practical assistance, aligning with psychology's Social Support Theory, which identifies social support as crucial for stress reduction and mental health. Through this network, Katie shifted from dependence on others to finding meaning through mutual support and cooperation. This transformation enhanced her self-efficacy and facilitated her psychological growth and self-realization.

During the COVID-19 Epidemic, people had to segregate themselves at home, at school, or in their neighborhoods. Masks obscured faces but not passionate hearts. Qianjiang Evening News-Hourly News started a series of "Hourly Shops" reports, representing the entanglements and dilemmas, survival, and vitality of small stores under the epidemic through personal accounts, in-depth investigations, community services, and other forms. The reports include many warm faces and experiences with distinct viewpoints and realistic storytelling. To ease communication among small store owners, Qianjiang Evening News-Hourly News issued a "rallying cry" and created a unique WeChat group to link these tiny retailers distributed around Hangzhou's districts and stay warm together (Huang, 2022: p. 1).

Historical disaster fiction examples offer modern perspectives. Citizens' resistance to "isolation" stems from feeling "abandoned," implying that management must ensure material security to reassure them. Katie's awakening shows that an individual's sense of value in a crisis comes from the concrete experience of being "needed." When people feel informed, involved, and connected, panic turns into collective resilience. As the literature suggests, the genuine "human dimension" should involve creating trust through information disclosure, fostering

empathy via community development, and ultimately transforming suffering into a collective affirmation of human dignity.

## 6.2. Reconstruction of Humanity in the Post-Epidemic Era

The transformation of abstract material into concrete human experiences is crucial in writing to avoid empathy fatigue. For example, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe details specific individuals, such as a compassionate woman breast-feeding her infant despite her impending death or a rapidly filling corpse pit.

Conventional communities, such as families and neighborhoods, are often fragile due to physical separation and differing values. Literature offers an alternative: an invisible connection based on empathy and narrative. In *The Painted Veil*, Katie shifts from a bystander to an active participant in the epidemic area, gradually integrating into a “temporary family” of nuns, doctors, and volunteers who care for orphans and assist with medical treatment. This community is formed through shared suffering and vulnerability rather than blood ties or shared beliefs.

As globalization progresses, experts have proposed two main possibilities. “On the one hand, globalization emphasizes a human destiny community; on the other hand, it has led to the rise and spread of nationalism and populism” (Wang, 2021: p. 28). In the post-pandemic era, literature promotes sympathetic tolerance by revisiting pain and reconstructing meaning through hope. Importantly, literature refuses to accept calamity as the end. Literature is a way of preserving the past and imagining the future (Solnit, 2004: p. 47). When we face “empathy fatigue” in real life, literature uses stories to reunite the fragmented aspects of humanity caused by the digital age. Ultimately, the tears and anger sparked by literature will flow into a lasting river of social responsibility and mutual aid in the real world.

## 7. Conclusion

“The figurative writing of the plague as an archetype and the characterization of the future community derived from the sense of community together offer readers an aesthetic feeling distinct from traditional literature” (Du, 2023: p. 47). Disasters reveal human nature’s survival impulses (bestiality), encourage rational contemplation, and, eventually, point to the search for transcendence (divinity).

In disaster stories, bestiality often represents the extreme survival instinct. When society collapses, humans may regress to weak animals. For example, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, inhabitants abandon the sick out of fear, hoard supplies, and even fight brutally for survival resources; Katie’s initial selfishness and vanity in *The Painted Veil* also represent human nature’s primordial aspirations. Bestiality accelerates disaster’s spread, and humanity eventually reaps the consequences.

Rationality, the opposite pole in literature, is seen in both the pursuit of meaning (as in Katie’s self-reflection in *The Painted Veil*) and the mechanical means of preventing disaster (as in the quarantine policy and mortality numbers in *A Journal of the Plague Year*). Calamity often reveals reason’s limitations: it cannot ex-

plain why disasters occur or fill the void when faith fails.

Divinity's role in disaster stories is complex. It offers a framework for understanding pain and provides spiritual solace, but it can also justify avoiding accountability. In *The Painted Veil*, the nuns' trust prompts Katie's enlightenment, yet it also highlights divinity's fragility.

Future studies could incorporate non-Western viewpoints, such as the Chinese anti-epidemic narrative in Bi Shumin's *Corolla Virus* and a comparison between Camus's *The Plague* and Bi Shumin's *Corolla Virus*. The 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China remains etched in people's memories. Qian Gang's diary of the event reveals both the noble and tragic aspects of human nature. Ordinary people exhibited a range of behaviors: some couples communicated distress signals to help each other, while others exploited the chaos to loot goods and even commit despicable acts like "picking up corpses." In life-and-death situations, human instincts come to the fore. Every crisis presents the challenge of curbing selfish actions and fostering greater selflessness and generosity. In the Japanese anime film *Thousand and Thousand Searches*, Chihiro transforms from a shy, parent-dependent little child to a strong, independent young girl in the face of a peculiar catastrophe, and with the support of her numerous friends, she ends up rescuing not only her parents but also others. Granny Tong, on the other hand, is portrayed as ugly and selfish in the film, and the two create a stark contrast that reflects the complexity and diversity of human behavior. In contrast, Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* depicts the cycle and repetition of human nature during a calamity. Each generation of the Buendia family faces similar challenges and conflicts, illustrating the flaws and limitations of human nature. Meanwhile, the Maccondo community exemplifies humankind's perseverance and unyieldingness in the face of tragedies like wars and hurricanes. Even though disasters have repeatedly wrecked the village and people's lives, they continue to rebuild their homes in the rubble and live on, symbolizing human nature's need to survive and hope for the future. These texts enhance the cultural diversity of disaster narratives and show how other communities perceive human nature. Combining Eastern and Western writings can create a global map of humanity's disasters. For example, *The Corolla Virus* emphasizes human oneness and social responsibility more than *The Plague*, which focuses on individual existential awakening. This comparison offers insights into crisis management in the age of globalization.

This study has three main innovations.

**Methodology innovation.** A "literary-psychological" framework is created by combining literary analysis with social psychology theories, transcending traditional literary criticism's singular viewpoint. For instance, applying terror management theory to the inhabitants' death-avoidance behavior in *A Journal of the Plague Year* shows how "death anxiety" fuels communal irrationality.

**Perspective innovation.** The contrast between the "nameless" and the "awakened" illustrates the dynamic process of human nature in a calamity, rather than static categories. For example, Katie's transformation from a vain noblewoman to

an epidemic volunteer demonstrates the interaction between rationality (reflecting on marriage) and divinity (imitating nuns), ultimately creating individual meaning in “meaninglessness.”

Historical comparison. Juxtaposing the 18th-century *A Journal of the Plague Year* with the 20th-century *The Painted Veil* reveals the “changes and constants” of human propositions. In the 18th century, scientific rationality was seen as a salvation tool, such as the death statistics in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, but became a symbol of alienation in the 20th century, like Walter’s self-punishment with medical knowledge in *The Painted Veil*.

Future research can build on this to create a “global database of human nature in disasters” and turn literary narratives into spiritual resources for crisis management. Disasters are written by human nature, and human nature is reborn in the process of writing disasters.

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## Conflicts of Interest

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

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