The City in the Plague: Study on Geography of Disease in A Journal of the Plague Year

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Abstract

Daniel Defoe's A Journal of the Plague Year depicts the city of London under the Great Plague in 1665. The novel contains a large number of spatial elements, such as cities, streets, buildings and houses. Adopting theories of Moretti, Lefebvre, Sawyer and some concepts from literary geography, this paper explores the humanist and rational connotations behind the spatial activities of the aristocracy, the emerging bourgeoisie and the grassroots in the urban, house and alley.

Keywords

A Journal of the Plague Year; Disease; Space; Literary Geography.

1. Introduction

As the pioneer and founder of the 18th-century English and European novel, Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) is known as "the father of the European novel". It is generally considered that Defoe published popular adventure novels with unique realistic projection and fantastic colors, such as *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). Comparatively, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (hereinafter referred to as "*Journal*") is a relatively plain novel, which describes the city of London under the attack of the Great Plague in 1665. The main character, H.F., is a saddler who lives in the city of London and makes his living by trading. He chooses to stay in London at the beginning of the plague and thus he witnesses various scenes during the plague. Following H.F.'s first person perspective, the author depicts a variety of houses and corners and people in different areas of London, and occasionally inserts and relays some of the strange and unusual things that really happened. With a large number of real data, Defoe presented a panoramic view of the city shrouded in plague in a way that combines the virtual and the real. *Journal* can be said to be the prototype and embryo of later historical fiction. [1]

Although *Journal* has been criticized for lack of continuous and intriguing plot and being filled with fragmented detail pieces. The research and argument on it have never ceased, especially with the realistic impact of the Covid 19. Researchers home and abroad have obtained abundant findings from different aspects, such as forms of discourse, crisis management, disease narrative and so on.

Nevertheless, few researchers have connected disease with rich spatial elements in the novel. From Defoe's vivid and realistic narrative can readers find the transformation of social and domestic spaces in urban and rural areas under the gloom of the epidemic. The unique filter of contagious disease magnifies the urban-rural and class conflicts, distorting people's true nature. By analyzing the impact of the plague on different spaces, it is possible to understand the essential characteristics of the aristocracy, bourgeoisie, and the civic class, which occupies different space. Based on this, this article is going to explore three different spaces shrouded by the plague, and further concludes Defoe's attitude to classes dominating different space according to their practices in the face of the plague.

At the end of the twentieth century, the academic world experienced a more or less dramatic "spatial turn", in which scholars began to look at the "spatiality" of human life, shifting the favor

previously given to time and history to space. The thesis of"spatial hermeneutics", as briefly defined and explained by Edward W. Sawyer in his Preface and Afterword to *Postmodern Geography*, is centered on the attempt to deconstruct and reconstruct stereotypical historical narratives, to free them from the linguistic prison of time. [2] Followingly, the field of spatial theory in literature has been enriched by many scholars. This paper will use mainly theories of Moretti, Lefebvre, Sawyer and some concepts from literary geography to cut the story at three levels: outer space, inner space and the literary scene to gain insight into the outer disease map, the inner spiritual space and the plague scene.

"Literary in space" and "space in literary" are introduced by Professor Franco Moretti of Stanford University in his Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900. The study of "literary in space" focuses on authentic history space while "space in literary" refers to fictious space. [3] Accordingly, Mei Xinlin have further refined the concept of "outer space" and "inner space" in literary geography as "double space", corresponding to "literature in space" and "space in literature" respectively.[4] In *Journal*, the author takes the plague of London in 1665 as the background and sets the city of London as the specific "outer space". In the text, the main character H.F. mentions more than 175 different specific streets, buildings, churches, subjective views, road signs and so on. However, it is worth noting that the effective self-help activities of the small characters through communication and cooperation, which the author focuses on, often take place in the fictional open or semi-open alleyway spaces, fictionalized by the author. Therefore, the alleyway space also becomes a unique "inner space".

Literary geographical forms differ from ordinary material forms in that they are spatial forms, and their variations exist in both "outer space" and "inner space". It needs to be integrated through a "scene restoration", a morphological analysis of literary geography. Returning to the text, it is not difficult to find that due to the outbreak of the plague, the houses change from open spaces dominated by their own will to closed spaces regulated by administrative decrees, and the spatial changes reflects the medical activities and changes in the lives of the residents in the plague scenario.

2. Chapter One: City Map of Disease: London Haunted by Plague

The literary map is a new method of research and criticism applied to the study of literary geography. In the long process of development, the literary map has also begun to differentiate between the concepts of "physicality" and "metaphoricity". The so-called "physicality" concept of "literary map" inherits the tradition of the combination of graphic and literary texts, with relatively complete graphic and intertextual functions. On the other hand, the "metaphoricity" concept of "literary map" mainly draws on the concept and method of "literary map" for text analysis and meaning interpretation. [4] This paper draws on the concept of "metaphoricity" to analyze the rich spatial narratives in the text, to obtain a map of disease with text, and to create a spatial and temporal picture of disease activity. As an opening exercise, it is important to first place the literary phenomenon into its unique space, to make it look like a map, and then to consider how the space shapes the novel's structure.

2.1. London as a Collapsed City

In terms of the history and trends of literary geography, "outer space" should not only include the geographic space of dissemination, but also the geographic space of literary origin and activity. "This space belongs to real rather than fictional historical space, but it is the root of the construction of 'space in literature' – inner space'" [5] Understanding the background of London and its influence on Defoe is crucial to understand the plot and setting designed by the author in *Journal*.

In Defoe's books such as his *The Encyclopedia of British Businessmen* (1725), one can see how well Defoe knew his history, loved his country and its people, and how he was particularly fascinated by its capital, London, to the extent that much of his work was centered on it. H.F., the protagonist of *Journal*, knows his London as well as Defoe, and knows every street in the city.

In Defoe's scattered "tangential" narratives, the reader can get a glimpse of the prosperous but chaotic city of London before the plague from extensive descriptions of the plague environment in the 1760s. with the end of the war, the disbanding of the army and the restoration of the crown and monarchy, so many people came to London in droves in an attempt to make a living in the urban area. As a consequence, it is estimated that the city held over 100,000 more people than it has ever held before, some say even more than twice as many as before. (54) Whether it was families who had gone bankrupt because of the Royalists, veterans who had retired from the army and come to the city to trade, or the poor from the countryside, all were flocking to the city. The influx of the poor made the old city even more crowded and chaotic. "Walking through this urban space can be physically and mentally disoriented. The streets are narrow and winding, sometimes only a few steps wide; large horse-drawn carts and coaches will rumble by, ignoring the walking tourists and splashing filth from the gutters." (12) It is not hard to find that the "outer space" was extremely crowded and prosperous.

If the previous order of the city was merely chaotic, the plague was certainly a removal of that order, so much so that the free and prosperous London city that H.F. knew as a saddler became unfamiliar. Defoe borrowed H.F.'s first point of view and said, "The face of London is indeed strangely altered at the moment, I mean the whole swathe of buildings, the city, the out-of-town jurisdictions, the suburbs, Westminster, Southwark and all." (53) This change in appearance is not due to changes in the layout or structure of the city, but to the lamentation and mourning that hangs on everyone's face, all of whom appear to be in mourning, and London is, so to speak, drenched in tears. The formerly bustling streets have become deserted and desolate, with few people in sight. The associations of Four Law were all closed because there were no lawyers to do the work. In some places, entire rows of houses had their doors and windows shut, the residents having fled, leaving only one or two watchmen behind. "In fact, you'd think that even the city itself was running away from the inside of it, and none of them would pull up behind it. From that moment on, all trades and industries, except those directly related to sustaining life, came to a complete halt." (160) The only thing that was busy was the parish corpse truck, which ran almost all night.

The urban space went from crowded to empty, from busy to desolate, and frightening sights were everywhere to be seen. Up to now, the outer space is completely altered due to the epidemic and the map of disease can be vividly shown considering the fact that the plague has occupied the city and continued to threaten the vicinity.

2.2. Aristocratic Abandonment of Treatment

The spread of the plague pushed the pause button on urban development and the replacement button of urban and rural living space. As mentioned earlier, the end of the war and the restoration of the king's government led to the further development of the enclosure movement, and large numbers of people from the countryside flock to the cities in order to find a job and settle down in the city.

All these scenes reminded H.F of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, when the Jews gathered to celebrate Passover and were thus attacked there, when they should have stayed in the countryside. The same is true of the poor who suffered from disease during the plague, who were not born into the city, who were forced to be trapped in it because of their livelihood as sufferers. And the nobles who had enjoyed the luxury of the court had run away as early as June, when the first signs of the plague had appeared.

As a result of the withdrawal of the nobles and the wealthy, the center of the city, which should have been the most prosperous, became empty instead, leaving only a dead silence. "Yes, many, many people fled, as we have seen, but they came mainly from the west end of the city; from what we call the heart of the city, that is to say, the wealthiest of the crowd; such as did not have to be weighed down by trade and sound; but the rest, the common people, stayed behind, it seems, to live with the worst of the situation." (53) Whereas outside the city's jurisdiction, and in the suburbs, in Southwark and in the East End, people mostly stayed behind. The rich central spaces were the first to fall away, while the areas where the poor gathered were still struggling.

The literati cannot create without the real historical space, and 'outer space' is an important field for the author to gain inspiration for secondary creation. In the real city of London, the author reveals the huge difference between the aristocracy and the poor people in the urban space against the backdrop of the Great Plague, and through the interchange of positions, he subtly shows the irresponsibility of the aristocratic ruling class and the helplessness of the poor people.

3. Chapter Two: Plague Scene Unveiled: Houses under Failed Treatment

"The concept of 'literary scene' is intrinsically linked to the concept of 'setting' in film and television, mainly referring to a highly personalized, irreplaceable, and unrepeatable spatial scene." [4] The literary scene is a self-contained world with an independent existence. When entering residents' houses, readers can see and hear and breathe in the unique space, over-whelmed by the plague, regulated by the government and restated by the author. Based in the enclosed space of the house shrouded by the epidemic disease, it is not only possible to glimpse the unique responses of the manager, the caretaker and the warded, but also to discover the author's desired attitude in the connection between outer space and inner space.

3.1. House as Isolated Units

As a crucial result of the "spatial turn", Lefebvre considered space as a product of society and proposed a "triadic theory of space" for the study of spatial analysis. When used to discuss the production of space itself, the triadic theory of space consists of three aspects: "spatial practices", "spatial representations" and "representational space". Combining with Sawyer's interpretation of the triad in *The Third Space*, "spatial practices" refer to the everyday activities of people in social space and "representations of space" refers to space conceived by planners, architects, and government officials.[6] The houses in *Journal* are places for inhabitants' daily practices. When the plague comes, the city regulates this space, and Defoe's description and reproduction of this scene gives it a more representational sense, which connects the "outer space" with the "inner space".

To prevent the rapid spread of the plague, the Lord Mayor of London and the City Senate decided to adopt house closures for the safety of all. Anyone suffering from the plague or showing any symptoms of it had to inform the health inspector within two hours, and the inspector or health officer would quarantine the patient in his house the same night, while the rest of the people were not allowed to move out of the infected house. The government's quarantine policy made some contributions when the epidemic broke out initially, decreasing the number of infected and effectively controlling some suburbs, including St. Martins.

Nevertheless, segregation policy reveals great cruelty. Overnight there were many closed, isolated prisons in the city, form which wails and cry came. Watchmen locked the doors of people's houses and stationed there day and night to prevent them from coming out in force. People who had not committed any crime were shut up simply because of their misfortune. (102) And those at home who were healthy could have escaped if they had moved away from

the sick, but the fact is that many of them perished in these miserable confinements. (96) Others were frightened to death by the horrible scenes they had witnessed.

The cruelty of the enclosed prison forced many to choose the desperate option of fleeing from the houses against all odds. When the plague first struck a household, it was usually the servants who were in charge of the shopping. The family would flee the house before the civil servants arrived, leaving the servants to face the disease alone. As a consequence, the owner fled with his family after watchmen left and the servants either died of the plague or were starved to death because they had no food to eat. The misery does not stop if people flee but grows worse. Those who had somewhere to go retreated to other houses, where they closed themselves in until the plague was over. Many fled but had nowhere else to go, they had to keep walking until they were weak and exhausted given that they had no rescue and the villages and houses along the way would not let them stay. The poor were thus left in a desperate state of isolation.

In Mike Clang's *Cultural Geography*, the discussion of the meaning of the depiction of cities and urban landscapes is more literary and revealing. Clang argues that the novel reveals the government's knowledge and mastery of potential threats through the geographic landscape, but also reveals the geography of a government's power. Under the power of government, the blockade of houses reduced what should have been a loving family space to an island, where the rich might have found another haven, while the poor, who worked for a living, were trapped in isolation.

3.2. Bourgeoisie Non-efficient Treatment

In addition to quarantining already infected families in situ, the elite class, represented by the municipality, took other means to curb the spread of the disease, but none of them was a futile effort.

To cope with physical illness, the Lord Mayor sent physicians and surgeons to rescue people. But due to a lack of basic medical knowledge, those doctors were so violent that patients were tortured, even to death. They put absorbent plasters on the lumps to make them break and fester. If this did not help, they cut the lumps open in a horrible manner or cauterized them with corrosive agents, with the result that some were tortured to death in a frenzied manner. (143) The mayor also ordered the Society of Physicians to issue a brochure of cheap medical treatment for poor people in various conditions of illness. (78) It is true that this was the kindest and most opportune thing that could be done at that time. But as H.F. comments in his article, "The kind of rampant plague, when it reached its height, was like the great fire of the following year; which devoured what the plague failed to stain, and defied the application of all remedies; and the plague defy all medical treatment." (79)

People's physical ailments cannot be completely resolved through the relief of the municipality, nor can all their psychological anxieties and anxieties be properly channeled. The increasing fear and anxiety led people to turn to fortune tellers, astrologers and wise men, asking them to calculate their heavenly charts and try to avoid bad luck. These foolish and absurd acts soon led to the emergence of a large number of illusionists in the city, who passed on "oracles of the devil" and were on the prowl. "Whenever a solemn-looking man, with a velvet coat, a ring and a black cloak, was passed around, people would follow them, huddle together and ask them questions, and follow them all the way." (67) The government actually did nothing in the face of the foolishness spread around by charlatans and those bluff books, because it did not want to offend those who were already mentally deranged. (64)

During the process of "scene restoration", it is of significance not to overlook the specific disease scene that are formed on the basis of outer space. [4] In the houses of the City of London, the Chief Executive and the Senate take various measures to combat the plague, leaving the administrative houses isolated and the poor without real care. The shift from open to closed housing conveys the author's unique emotional symbolism. Although the elite did not flee, the

measures they adopted were isolated and fragmented, lacking in system and integrity, and unable to meet the needs of the masses.

4. Chapter Three: Inner Space of Cure: Alleys Fostering Comradeship

Instead of relying on authentic history space, "space in literature" or "inner space" is created by the author, contributing to better shaping the story and characters and send emotions and reflections of the creator of the space. Hence, what should be expected and excavated in the "inner space" is Defoe's creative intention and implied meaning behind the story. In *Cultural Geography*, Clang focuses on cultural connotations in the study of geographic sites and spaces from the perspective of cultural positioning, where geographic sites are seen as symbolic systems with values. [7] For him, literary geography is the fusion of literature and geography; literature does not simply reflect the external world, but is part of the complex web of meanings of the real world. In *Journal*, fictious alley space, in which common people without wealth and power survive through mutual-aid, are representations of cure space, in which people tortured by plague can be saved with comradeship.

4.1. Alleys as Fields of Comradeship

In *Journal*, Defoe creates a unique alley space in which ordinary citizens (especially refer to the employed, less affluent proletariat) can interact with each other and help each other to overcome their difficulties. The story of two brothers and one of their relatives (hereafter referred to as the "three brothers"), on which Defoe devotes much of his writing, is highly representative. Unlike the real streets, buildings and signposts that appear in abundance in the text, the alley spaces have no specific names or positioning, but are open or semi-open spaces that are entirely fictionalized by the author. In these spaces, ordinary citizens can talk freely, play to their strengths and carry out a range of self-help activities. By concentrating on the self-help activities of the citizens in the alleyway spaces and trying "spiritual exploration", it is clear that the light of reason and the power that grows out of the union of ordinary citizens can be seen.

Faced with the unknown and the ravages of disease, the three brothers use their strengths to help each other overcome the crisis and survive. One of the three brothers is John (now a baker), a veteran who is unable to do heavy work because of his wounds, Thomas (now a shipbuilder), a seaman with a broken leg, and Richard, a carpenter with only a toolbox. The three are in a sloppy situation, but in order to escape the infected suburbs of Stepney, they decide to make their way north. Before they left, they turned all their money into shared savings, no matter how much or how little they earned, without complaining, and they are all satisfied with this and never mind. (206) When the difficulty of accommodation came up, the carpenter and the sailor, though they had different proposals, were united in their peaceful argument, and worked together to make a portable tent, and to fit it with poles and side panels. After that, three men, a tent, a horse and a gun went on their way. The carpenter took a small bag of tools with him in the hope that he could find some work on the road to keep the group afloat. The sailor led the way for the group with a compass in his clothes, referring to the direction of the wind. The old soldier took his gun with him, no longer a worker baking hard bread, but a horseman, guarding his group. (207)

In the process of cultural representation, it is essential to note how literature uses representation, reproduction, meaning, imagination, metaphor and symbol to encode and reorganize the meaning of space, reveal the cultural and political connotation of the spatial reorganization of modernity and its socio-historical significance, and thus reveal the intrinsic connection between literary and social production.[8] Here, "three brother", on behalf of common citizens, cooperating in the alley space is the symbol of hope in a dark and plaguey environment.

4.2. Civic Self-initiated Mutual Treatment

Clang notes, "We use spatial shorthand to summarize the characteristics of other groups, i.e. to define 'them' according to where they live ...... Space plays a key role in defining 'other' groups."[7] In alley space, there were kind and simple citizens, who succeeded in saving themselves because of their union, their kind thinking and other valuable qualities, while both the noble and bourgeoisie failed to save them.

Of course, except three brothers, there are many others like them who know how to help each other. On a remote road in Hackney, the three found a barn-like structure and set up their tent inside. And that night they encountered another group of men who had escaped from the same place as they had. Richard the carpenter negotiated with one of them and during the conversation both parties established that both groups were healthy. The three then decided to move away from the barn and pitch their tents outside for the sake of the other group, who did not want to disturb them too much and let them move from the barn. Eventually both teams settled in the barn and the other went deep inside the barn, the little carpenter keeping sentry duty for the first half of the night and John the soldier switching shifts with him, while by the early hours of the morning the two teams had begun to interchange. (215) Along the way, the three brothers received relief from gentlemen, priests and townspeople, and felt many kindnesses and favors. The moral light of ordinary citizens shines through the story of the three men.

The citizens who appear in the alley space do not have the wealth of the royalty of the city and have not been educated as the elite. What beneath their unpretentious shells there is a core of goodness, a free spirit, the ability to think and the strength that comes from working together. They are pure in nature and observe manners. When the three brothers meet others like them in the barn, they choose to be humble. When they walked into a strange town, they did not ask for relief just because they were weak. As John said, if one of them died, the two outside would bury him without costing the villagers a penny (230) They think rationally and are resourceful and intelligent. As perennially employed workers, they do not give up their struggle just because they have nowhere to return to when the plague is prevalent, but instead think seriously about their relationship with the city. In an interaction with Thomas, John says that the whole kingdom and the city are his native soil. He could no more leave the city of his birth if it was infected with the plague than he could run away if his house was on fire. And he was not a sojourner, he was only travelling outside on his legitimate grounds. (203)

Defoe's playful depiction of the three brothers' self-help process amplifies the part of the ordinary citizens who are not crushed by fear and embodies the positive qualities of the underclass. The open space of the alleyway is a key arena for them to interact and amplify their strength. Not only that, the interpretation of the meaning of literary space in Moretti's *Atlas of the European Novel*, points mainly to the metaphorical significance of sociology, which means different spaces of the city mean different class divisions. In this regard. The alley space is fundamentally distinct with the outer city space and houses given that it is the only space where the real power to save the public from the fire has been discovered. That is comradeship of citizens.

5. Conclusion

"Since the Renaissance, the growing tendency to replace collective traditions with individual experience as the ultimate present seems to have provided an important cultural context for the rise of the novel." Illuminated by the light of humanistic reason, Defoe has developed a more thorough reflection and understanding of the aesthetic dimension of individual behavior. He infused this understanding into his work and expressed it through the different spatial divisions. The fall of the feudal class is mirrored by the flight of the royal family from the City of London,

which gave up resistance in the midst of the plague and fled, ultimately failing to escape the wash of the capitalist tide. The new aristocracy and the emerging bourgeoisie, represented by the senators and the chief executive, responded to disease by various means, including a policy of isolation that turned domestic spaces into enclosed spaces. It is true that some of these methods were already scientific, but the technological and medical conditions of the time, as well as the bourgeoisie's natural inclination to defend its own interests, meant that the policies of the municipalities could not really save the poor and the needy. The proletarians, who were interconnected through the open alleyways, did not have the wealth or status to do so, but through the awakening and uniting of their individual strengths, they were able to achieve a successful self-help campaign, bringing the humanist spirit of the Renaissance to the forefront. The plague creates new contradictions and challenges, and becomes a unique magnifying glass through which the author can observe the activities of all classes, and through which the grey curtain of the disease can glimpse the shades of grey and light of human nature.

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