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## psychiatry in literature

### Epidemics: A Journal of the Plague Year, London, 1665 – by Daniel Defoe

Greg Wilkinson 

Defoe relates that at the beginning of December 1664, two men, said to be French, died of plague at the upper end of Drury Lane. While ‘knavery and collusion’ underestimated mortality, panic set in from mid-1665:

[T]he richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry from the west part of the city, thronged out of town with their families and servants [...] nothing was to be seen but waggons and carts, with goods, women, servants, children, &c.; coaches [...] all hurrying away [...].

[T]here was no getting at the Lord Mayor’s door [...] there were such pressing and crowding there to get passes and certificates of health for such as travelled abroad, for without these there was no being admitted to pass through the towns upon the road, or to lodge in any inn [...].

All the plays and interludes [...] were forbid to act; the gaming-tables, public dancing-rooms, and music-houses, which multiplied and began to debauch the manners of the people, were shut up and suppressed; and the jack-puddings, merry-andrews, puppet-shows, rope-dancers, and such-like doings, which had bewitched the poor common people, shut up their shops, finding indeed no trade; for the minds of the people were agitated with other things, and a kind of sadness and horror at these things sat upon the countenances even of the common people. Death was before their eyes, and everybody began to think of their graves, not of mirth and diversions.

[I]t was seldom that the weekly bill came in but there were two or three put in, ‘frighted’; that is, that may well be called frightened to death. But besides those who were so frightened as to die upon the spot, there were great numbers frightened to other extremes, some frightened out of their senses, some out of their memory, and some out of their understanding.

[E]very one looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger. [...] London might well be said to be all in tears [...]. The shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors of their houses, where their dearest relations were perhaps dying, or just dead, were so frequent to be heard as we passed the streets [...]. Tears and lamentations were seen almost in every house, especially in the first part of the visitation; for towards the latter end men’s hearts were hardened, and death was so always before their eyes, that they did not so much concern themselves for the loss of their friends, expecting that themselves should be summoned the next hour.’

Defoe was 5 in 1665: his exhaustive account resonates today, albeit as fiction.

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