The Decameron: Authors Experience During The Black Plague

The plague, also known as the Black Death was a major pandemic that ravaged Europe and parts of Asia during the mid-fourteenth century, from 1347 until 1351. This disease was characterized by extreme weakness, bleeding profusely, shock, skin turning black (which is where it got its name) and eventually death. It was mainly spread by infected fleas from person to person as well as by infected mice who resided on trade ships who traveled through well-developed routes that stopped in densely populated trade centers such as Rome, Genoa, and London. Besides just the huge population loss that occurred during this tragedy, there were also very potent short- and long-term effects that changed the continent forever. The Black Death was the worst thing to happen to the European continent and also had the most significant impact on the economy, family life, and religious beliefs in Europe during the fourteenth century.

Newly developed urban trade centers were allowing Europe to experience a very prosperous economy which was bringing in goods from all over the world and also increasing the quality of life for most. However, once the Black Death began taking its hold on Europe, people started to avoid these areas for fear of contracting the disease. This directly led to a large decline in the amount of money flowing in to these cities who were relying on this trade for their well-being. One other economic effect of the plague was a heavy increase in the price of certain goods. For example, due to there not being enough abled body men to harvest fields of grain, the price of food made from grains nearly doubled in England (1). France experienced similar increases in the price of food as well (2). Interestingly enough, after the plague was over the peasant population actually experienced a modest increase in their standard of living. In an article titled The Impact of the Black Death on Peasant Economy in England by Harry Kitsikopoulos, this was due to a loss of family members, along with less seigneurial burdens (3). After losing many family members, there was extra money around to do what they wanted with. A smaller population coupled with a surplus of some goods due to there not being as many people around still to purchase said goods drove the price down. As a result, most peasants were able to afford more and therefore increase their standard of living for a while. However, landlords were not too happy about this and soon tried to reclaim some of their money lost from decreased production from their tenants eventually leading to a revolt in 1381. Besides just impacts on the overall economy and prices of goods during the plague, family and social structures also experienced vast changes.

When the plague first began, people did not know a whole lot about it, especially when it came to the ways in which it was transmitted. Family members were quick to rush to one and others sides when they noticed someone was ill, trying their best to take care of them. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to them at the time was that this was a perfect way for the plague to travel from person to person via infected fleas that were found on or around the ill. Eventually, people started to avoid the ill because they knew better. As a result, families were divided and social ties were disintegrated in a vain attempt to avoid this impending doom. A famous poet of the time, Giovanni Boccaccio wrote short stories about what he saw first-hand during this time and put them together in a book called The Decameron. He observed that family members were fleeing from each other; wives from husbands and even parents from their own kids to try to escape the disease (4). Furthermore, since no one wanted to be around the dead, rituals like

burying those who have passed, did not happen anymore and instead the bodies littered the streets. Besides severing social ties and tearing families apart, the Black Death also had a predominant effect on religion at the time.

There were two major religious impacts of the black death. The first was the persecution of Jews who were believed to be the cause of the plague, and the second was a decline of confidence in the Catholic church overall. Once the plague took its hold on Europe, everyone was looking for an explanation as to what the cause was so that they could put an end to it. Unfortunately, rumors started spreading that Jewish people wanted were poisoning the wells because they wanted to overthrow the Catholic church, and therefore causing people to get sick and die (5). This rumor became widely accepted and eventually the Jewish population was tortured and killed because of it, predominantly in the Holy Roman Empire but also in other parts of Europe. One account from a man who lived in Strasbourg named Königshofen described a horrific scene. On Valentines day in 1349, he witnessed about two thousand Jews being burned in a cemetery if they did not agree to become baptized instead (6). Furthermore, he watched parents pulling their own kids out of the fire to instead be baptized which was the only way to spare them from a horrific death (7). The catholic church also experienced difficulty during this time. Religion was a very important part of most Europeans lives, and once the plague took hold, they looked to the Church for answers. However, even the Church had a difficult time explaining how or why God would let something like this happen. An inability to explain what was happening along with a loss of priests and other important clergymen who died as a result of the disease led to a slow decline of the faith that European Christians had in their church.

The Black Death was the worst catastrophe to happen to the European continent with an estimated that fifty million people perishing as a result. Not only was the loss of life an unfortunate consequence of this pandemic, the stability of Europe as a whole was shaken up. First off, a once booming economy experienced extreme turmoil as a result of there not being enough able bodies to work which led to a steep increase in some goods, but a significant decline in others. Second, the overall family life was turned upside down. Parents were even abandoning their own children if they fell ill in an attempt to save themselves. Lastly, there were severe religious impacts as Jews were burned alive and overall faith in the European Church declined due to loss of priests to help others out in this time of need. Luckily, the Black Death ended in 1351. A lot of lessons were learned from this time such as new ways to treat the ill and how to handle pandemics overall. After awhile the economy recovered, family life returned to normal, and faith was reinstalled in the European population but this period in European history left a permanent impact on the continent.