



Exploring The Metaphorical Significance Of The Pandemic In Geraldine Brooks' "Year Of Wonders"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the text of Geraldine Brooks' novel *Year of Wonders* and how the bubonic plague is used as a multidimensional metaphor. Set in the small English town of Eyam in 1666, the novel uses the plague to explore themes of terror, social collapse, isolation, purification, and rejuvenation. The research magnifies how Brooks uses these metaphors to illustrate the significant psychological and social repercussions of the pandemic, giving insights into human resilience and the capacity for transformation in the face of disaster. The study investigates how the novel reflects both historical and contemporary concerns, emphasizing the themes' significance in the context of current crises such as the COVID-19 epidemic. Finally, the study contends that the *Year of Wonders* is a timeless exploration of the human capacity for endurance and rejuvenation.

Keywords: Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders*, bubonic plague, fear, social disintegration, isolation, purification, renewal, human resilience, pandemic literature.

Introduction

A. Overview of Pandemic Narratives

Pandemic narratives have long served as a powerful tool for understanding the collective and social disruptions that arise in response to global crises. Such discourses interpret the dynamics of fear, isolation, and resilience. Hence, offering insights into how individuals and communities deal with the existential threats that are posed by pandemics. Among the rich tradition of pandemic literature, Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders* stands out as an evocative exploration of resilience and transition during the bubonic plague of 1666. The story begins in the small English village of Eyam. This novel through its historical setting, represents the human perspective on the global crisis. However, it also engages with broader themes such as the vulnerabilities of social bonds and the potential for individual and communal rebirth in the aftermath of disaster.

B. Central Thesis

This paper examines how *Year of Wonders* employs plague as a complex metaphor to explore the themes of fear, social disintegration, isolation, purification, and rebirth. However, through the lens of these metaphors, Brooks not only recapitulates the historical events of the Eyam plague but also questions the psychological and moral complexity that arise in the face of such terrible tragedy. The story focuses on the protagonist, Anna Frith, and other villagers' experiences, serving as a model for exploring bigger social and interpersonal responses to the pandemic. Central to this reading is the text's portrayal of the plague as a testbed for endurance that ultimately evolve the human spirit, demonstrating both the destructive and redemptive potential of such an apocalyptic event.

Anna Frith: A Gendered Perspective on the Plague

In *Year of Wonders*, Anna Frith's transformation during the plague can be best understood through the lenses of **gender performativity** and **intersectionality**. At the beginning of the novel, Anna is confined by 17th-century England's rigid social structures. Her identity is shaped by her roles as a widow, servant, and mother. These roles, defined by her **gender** and **class**, however placed her on the margins of society where her work is unappreciated. Her opportunities with the agency are restricted. As the bubonic plague devastates Eyam,

these overlapping oppressions are shattered. This allows Anna to redefine herself beyond the customary constraints imposed by her gender and class.

Using **Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity**, Anna's initial life can be seen as a performance shaped by social expectations of women, particularly lower-class women. She is expected to serve, nurture, and fulfil domestic duties. However, the pandemic forces Anna to step outside these expectations. As male authority figures die to the pandemic, women such as Anna begin to fill roles normally held for men. Anna's growing expertise in **herbal medicine** and her leadership within the village mark her departure from her previous, restricted identity, and her ability to **perform gender differently** in a time of crisis.

Intersectionality, a concept developed by **Kimberlé Crenshaw**, highlights how Anna's transformation is not just a matter of gender but also class. Before the plague, her gender and low socioeconomic status reinforce each other, further limiting her agency. However, the pandemic creates opportunities for people like Anna to overcome their class-based limitations. As the demand for caregivers and healers increases, Anna's skills become crucial to the community's survival. This transformation allows her to go beyond her previous social standing, but it also highlights the vulnerabilities that those on the edges face as social systems begin to erode. In contrast, characters like **Elinor Mompellion**, who come from higher social ranks, experience the collapse of social structures differently. While Elinor seeks redemption and purification through service. Hence, she remains confined by her privileged background. Anna's transformation is more radical because her lower-class status leaves her with less social protection, making her rise to power more precarious but also more liberating. The novel thus demonstrates how pandemics can provide a rupture in existing hierarchies, creating a space for **gender and class** roles to be reimagined.

Comparative Analysis: While **Albert Camus' *The Plague*** explores similar disruptions to social structures, its focus on existentialism lacks the **gendered** and **class-focused** analysis present in *Year of Wonders*. A more fitting comparison might be **Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider***, which also highlights how pandemics reveal gender inequalities and the precariousness of women's roles in society. In Porter's work, the protagonist Miranda faces societal expectations as a woman during the 1918 influenza pandemic, much like Anna, who must navigate and redefine her identity in response to the collapse of traditional structures. Both novels use the pandemic as a lens to explore how crises dismantle social norms, particularly those affecting women.

Anna's ultimate decision to leave Eyam represents a complete rejection of the restrictions once imposed on her by both gender and class. By choosing a path as a healer and midwife abroad, she symbolizes the potential for personal rebirth and renewal in the aftermath of a disaster. Her departure reflects the possibility that pandemics, while destructive, can also create opportunities for women to break free from societal constraints and forge new identities in a transformed world.

The Plague as a Metaphor for Fear and Social Disintegration

In *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks uses the plague to illustrate how fear spreads through a community, mirroring the contagion of the disease. The fear caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic does more than heighten anxieties; it dismantles social cohesion, deepening existing divisions, particularly along **gender** and **class** lines. Brooks demonstrates how women, especially those who challenge patriarchal norms, bear the brunt of this fear through **scapegoating and violence**.

The village's treatment of **Mem and Anys Gowdie** encapsulates this dynamic. Both women possess knowledge of herbal medicine, a power that operates outside the male-dominated religious authority of Eyam. Their independence—Mem as a healer and Anys as an unmarried, outspoken woman—makes them easy targets when the villagers, desperate for control, seek someone to blame. Their persecution as witches reflects a common historical response to crises: women with knowledge outside sanctioned structures become scapegoats for collective fear. In the context of **pandemic literature**, this pattern of **gendered scapegoating** highlights how crises often amplify existing prejudices, turning fear into justification for **violence against women**.

Brooks critically engages with the **intersection of gender and class** in the treatment of Mem and Anys. As women without male protection or high social standing, their marginalization places them at greater risk during the crisis. The plague exposes their social vulnerability, as their gender, class, and independence make them symbols of disorder in a patriarchal system that is unravelling. The witch hunts thus serve as a metaphor for how societies, in moments of instability, reassert control by silencing women who threaten the status quo.

Michael Mompellion's diminishing authority throughout the novel further illustrates the broader collapse of male-dominated power. Initially, Mompellion holds moral authority, guiding the village through its early days of quarantine. However, as the death toll rises, his control weakens. His inability to provide answers or solutions mirrors the broader failure of male authority during pandemics, when crises exceed the capacity of traditional leadership. Brooks critiques this failure by showing how male authority figures, when they falter, create a vacuum that is often filled by fear, superstition, and the targeting of marginalized women.

A more fitting comparison is **Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven***, which explores how a flu pandemic leads to the breakdown of societal norms and the rise of patriarchal violence against women. In both *Year of Wonders* and *Station Eleven*, women who defy traditional roles—whether through independence, knowledge, or leadership—become scapegoats for societal fears. In Mandel's novel, women face exploitation and coercion in post-pandemic communities, revealing how crises often entrench or escalate gender-based oppression. Both

works critically examine how pandemics magnify the power dynamics within societies, particularly through **gendered violence**.

In *Year of Wonders*, Brooks uses the plague to highlight the fragility of social structures, particularly patriarchal systems, which collapse under the weight of fear. Mem and Anys Gowdie's persecution exemplifies how pandemics bring latent misogyny to the surface, as women who exist outside patriarchal norms are punished when male authority weakens. The novel's focus on **gendered scapegoating** during the pandemic critically underscores how crises can accelerate the disintegration of ethical and moral standards, with vulnerable groups—especially women—bearing the greatest costs.

Isolation as a Metaphor for Psychological and Social Suffering

In *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks uses the imposed **quarantine** not just as a measure to contain the plague, but as a metaphor for the emotional and social isolation that the villagers experience. Isolation in the novel is not merely physical; it profoundly affects the psychological state of the characters, particularly women, who are often left to cope with their burdens in solitude. Brooks critically engages with the theme of isolation to examine how pandemics not only spread disease but also dismantle communal ties and magnify emotional suffering.

For **Anna Frith**, isolation is a central element of her emotional journey. The loss of her children and the collapse of her social world intensified her sense of loneliness and disconnection. The physical separation caused by the quarantine mirrors Anna's internal isolation, as she is forced to process her grief and trauma in solitude. This isolation strips away her former identity, making her confrontation with the plague also a confrontation with her sense of self. Brooks depicts this isolation as both devastating and transformative, particularly in how it forces Anna to evolve into a stronger, more independent individual.

Brooks highlights the **gendered dimension** of isolation. Women in the novel, especially Anna, are often tasked with caregiving, even as they suffer from the emotional toll of the pandemic. While men such as **Michael Mompellion** are paralyzed by the scale of the crisis, women like Anna and **Elinor Mompellion** assume crucial roles in the community, tending to the sick and offering emotional support. This caregiving, however, compounds their emotional isolation, as they must shoulder these burdens without relief or support. Brooks thus uses isolation to illustrate the additional **emotional labour** that women are expected to perform during crises, reflecting broader societal expectations of women as nurturers.

The novel also explores **intersectionality** in how isolation affects characters differently based on their gender and class. Anna, as a servant, is already marginalized by her lower social status. The pandemic deepens her sense of isolation, as she is cut off from the structures of power and wealth that protect others. At the same time, the crisis creates opportunities for her to break free from the social constraints that once bound her. In the absence of male authority, Anna steps into roles that give her a new sense of agency and independence. This dual experience of isolation—both as a burden and a path to transformation—reveals the complex ways in which **gender and class** intersect during crises, especially for women like Anna who exist on the margins of society.

In **Mary Shelley's *The Last Man***, the theme of isolation is also central. The novel, set in a future world devastated by a pandemic, explores how physical and emotional isolation shapes the protagonist's journey. Much like Anna, Shelley's protagonist loses his family and is left to navigate a desolate world, physically and emotionally cut off from others. However, where *The Last Man* focuses on the universal human experience of isolation, Brooks zeroes in on the **gendered aspect** of this experience. In *Year of Wonders*, isolation disproportionately affects women, who are not only physically isolated but also emotionally burdened by the additional responsibilities of caregiving and maintaining social order amidst the collapse. Brooks thus offers a more focused exploration of the **gendered consequences** of isolation in the context of a pandemic.

Brooks uses Anna's isolation as a metaphor for **personal rebirth** as well. Cut off from her old life and forced to confront her grief alone, Anna is transformed by the experience of isolation. Her growth from a widow and servant to a healer and leader is a direct result of the emotional and social challenges she faces during the plague. This transformation illustrates how pandemics, while destructive, can also create spaces for personal growth and empowerment, particularly for women who are otherwise constrained by gender and class expectations.

Purification through Suffering

In *Year of Wonders*, the plague serves as a crucible for **purification through suffering**, particularly for the novel's protagonist, **Anna Frith**. Brooks illustrates how the trauma and devastation brought by the pandemic force characters to confront their deepest fears, flaws, and identities. This theme of purification is framed not in religious terms, but in personal and social transformation, with the plague stripping away societal roles and compelling individuals—especially women—to redefine themselves.

For **Anna**, purification is not tied to moral redemption but to the reshaping of her identity through the trials of the plague. At the start of the novel, Anna's role in society is determined by her **gender** and **class**. As a servant and a widow, she is restricted to caregiving roles within the household and is largely invisible in the broader social hierarchy of the village. However, the plague destabilizes these traditional structures, creating space for Anna to emerge as a figure of authority, knowledge, and resilience. The physical and emotional

suffering she endures—losing her children, her husband, and her community—strips away her previous identity and forces her to find new strength.

This transformation reflects the broader **gendered theme** of the novel, where women—often marginalized in times of stability—rise to prominence in moments of crisis. **Elinor Mompellion**, too, undergoes a form of purification through suffering, though her journey is shaped more by guilt and the need for redemption. Elinor's role as a teacher and guide to Anna highlights how women, through their shared suffering, find new paths to power and influence, even as the traditional male authority figures falter or retreat.

Anna's transformation through suffering also underscores the **intersectionality** of her experience. Her role as a lower-class woman places her in a vulnerable position, yet it also allows her to occupy spaces of healing and leadership that higher-status women may not have been able to claim. As the plague progresses, Anna learns **herbal medicine**, assists in childbirth, and ultimately becomes a central figure in the village's survival. This form of **purification**—where suffering leads to growth—shows how pandemics can break down rigid social hierarchies, allowing individuals like Anna to rise beyond their predetermined roles.

Comparative Analysis: In **Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***, similar themes of **purification through suffering** are explored. Butler's protagonist, **Lauren Olamina**, must navigate a dystopian world ravaged by societal collapse, much like Anna in *Year of Wonders*. Lauren, too, experiences suffering that transforms her identity and leadership capabilities, as she breaks away from traditional gender expectations to become a leader and visionary in her own right. Both novels highlight how crises—whether pandemic or societal—serve as catalysts for the personal transformation of women who were previously marginalized. Unlike many male protagonists in literature, both Anna and Lauren experience their purification through the acceptance of their suffering and the active reshaping of their roles, stepping into positions of leadership and healing.

The theme of purification in *Year of Wonders* is also in contrast to **Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year***, where suffering is seen as a divine test, with purification tied to faith and religious survival. In contrast, Brooks presents suffering as a **secular process** of personal empowerment and social transformation, particularly for women. While Defoe's narrator seeks divine intervention and interprets survival as evidence of religious purification, Brooks' narrative suggests that purification comes from resilience and the ability to adapt to new social realities.

Ultimately, **Anna's purification** is deeply tied to her ability to redefine herself outside the traditional confines of **gender** and **class**. The plague forces her to shed her former roles and emerge as a self-reliant, skilled leader, able to provide healing and guidance in a time of chaos. Her journey reflects how pandemics can act as agents of both destruction and renewal, with suffering serving as the catalyst for rebirth.

Witch Hunts and Social Breakdown

In *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks uses the plague as a catalyst for the disintegration of social order, where **fear** and **superstition** lead to the violent persecution of marginalized individuals, especially women. The **witch hunts** in the novel symbolize how pandemics exacerbate existing inequalities and trigger irrational fear responses to the crisis. In Eyam, **Mem and Anys Gowdie** become targets of the community's growing fear because of their independence and knowledge of herbal medicine, which exists outside the sanctioned authority of male-dominated religious structures.

Brooks demonstrates how, in times of crisis, **gendered violence** emerges as a method of reasserting control. **Mem and Anys**, both women who challenge patriarchal norms through their autonomy and knowledge, are branded as witches. Their persecution reveals the intersection of **gender and power**, where women who hold knowledge outside traditional male authority are viewed as threats. As the plague intensifies and social cohesion frays, the villagers' fear turns into violence, with women bearing the brunt of the community's need for a scapegoat.

Historically, pandemics have often led to the persecution of **women** perceived as outside traditional roles. Brooks mirrors this history, showing how the villagers' fear of the unknown transforms into gendered scapegoating. The **intersectionality** in the novel is evident: Mem and Anys, as unmarried, independent women, are doubly vulnerable because they defy both gender expectations and the social hierarchies of the village. Their knowledge and independence become a source of fear for a community seeking control over an uncontrollable disaster.

As male authority, particularly embodied by **Michael Mompellion**, begins to falter, the villagers turn to superstition and violence. Mompellion's initial role as the village's moral leader disintegrates as the plague worsens, reflecting how pandemics can expose the fragility of traditional male leadership. His inability to prevent witch hunts demonstrates how **patriarchal power structures** often fail to protect communities in the face of uncontrollable crises, leaving marginalized women to suffer the consequences.

In **José Saramago's *Blindness***, we see a similar breakdown of social order and the emergence of **gendered violence** during a crisis. Saramago's novel portrays a dystopian society where an epidemic of blindness causes society to collapse, leading to the exploitation and brutalization of women. Like Brooks, Saramago examines how societal breakdowns during pandemics exacerbate the marginalization and violence against women, who are often the first to be victimized in moments of chaos. Both *Year of Wonders* and *Blindness* critically examine how fear and societal collapse open the door to the violent repression of women, especially those who threaten the status quo.

The witch hunts in *Year of Wonders* highlight how fear and the desire for control lead to the persecution of those who defy traditional gender roles. Mem and Anys, as healers, represent a challenge to the village's male-dominated religious authority, and in a time of crisis, this challenge is met with violence. This dynamic is also reflected in **Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera***, where patriarchal control and social hierarchies persist even amidst a devastating pandemic. While Márquez focuses more on social order than violent repression, both novels explore how pandemics expose the underlying fragility of societal structures, particularly in how women are treated.

A fitting comparison can be drawn with **Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***, where women's bodies and autonomy are also subjected to control and violence in a collapsing society. In both *Year of Wonders* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the social order seeks to reassert control through the oppression of women, particularly those who challenge the norms of gender and power. In Atwood's dystopian world, women's roles are strictly defined and enforced, with severe consequences for those who defy these expectations. Similarly, in Brooks' novel, women like Mem and Anys, who transgress the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour, are met with violent repression, showing how crises—whether pandemics or political upheavals—amplify patriarchal violence.

Brooks uses the witch hunts as a metaphor for the **social breakdown** that occurs during pandemics, emphasizing how women who defy traditional roles are punished when male authority crumbles. In Mem and Anys Gowdie's persecution, we see how pandemics bring latent misogyny to the surface, with the community's fear of the plague transforming into violence against women who exist outside the accepted gender roles.

Existential Crisis and the Pandemic as an Unusual Situation

In *Year of Wonders*, the plague acts as a catalyst for an **existential crisis** that affects both individuals and the community at large. The pandemic forces characters—especially women like **Anna Frith**—to confront the fragility of life, death, and the structures that once provided them with meaning. As the social, religious, and familial bonds that held the village together begin to disintegrate, Brooks illustrates how pandemics strip away the certainties of daily life, leaving characters to grapple with the chaos and arbitrariness of survival.

For Anna, the plague induces a profound **existential reckoning**. She loses her children, husband, and community, and is forced to navigate a world where the old structures of support and identity no longer exist. This loss pushes Anna into a space where she must redefine herself outside of her prescribed gender roles. Brooks frames Anna's journey as one of **self-discovery**, where the pandemic, though destructive, opens the possibility for personal transformation. Through her suffering, Anna emerges as a healer and leader, challenging traditional notions of female identity and showing how crises can act as a vehicle for **personal empowerment**.

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping how this existential crisis unfolds. For male characters like **Michael Mompellion**, the pandemic shatters the religious and moral authority that once defined their roles in society. Mompellion's existential crisis leads to his eventual unravelling, as he realizes that the structures of faith and male leadership he relied upon are powerless in the face of the plague. In contrast, Anna's crisis leads her toward a path of growth and empowerment, reflecting how **gendered experiences** of suffering and survival differ during pandemics. While male authority falters, women like Anna find new roles and sources of meaning, stepping into spaces left vacant by the collapse of traditional patriarchal structures.

A suitable comparative text for this theme is **Albert Camus' *The Plague***, which similarly explores the **existential crisis** brought on by an uncontrollable pandemic. In *The Plague*, characters like Dr. Rieux must confront the absurdity of suffering and death without relying on religious or philosophical comfort. Like Anna in *Year of Wonders*, the characters in Camus' novel grapple with the meaninglessness of suffering but respond by finding purpose in their actions rather than in old structures of belief. However, where Camus focuses on universal human suffering, Brooks emphasizes the **gendered dimensions** of this existential crisis, particularly in how women's roles shift as male-dominated systems falter.

Brooks also examines the **isolation** that pandemics impose, both physically and emotionally. As Anna is cut off from her family and community, she faces the profound loneliness that comes with both the quarantine and the loss of social structures. This isolation forces Anna to confront her **existential alienation**, as she must survive and redefine herself without the support of the old social and religious frameworks. Brooks portrays this isolation as a double-edged sword: while it deepens Anna's suffering, it also offers her the opportunity to transcend the limitations imposed by her **gender and class**, emerging as a more self-reliant and independent figure.

Another fitting comparison is **José Saramago's *Blindness***, where characters, after an epidemic of blindness, are also forced to confront a new reality devoid of structure and order. In *Blindness*, as in *Year of Wonders*, women are central to the narrative, with their experiences of isolation and existential crisis shaped by their roles as caregivers and survivors. Both novels explore how pandemics reveal the fragility of human systems, forcing individuals to find meaning in their actions and relationships rather than in external structures. In both texts, women navigate these existential crises by redefining their roles and asserting their agency in a world where traditional gender expectations are eroding.

In *Year of Wonders*, the plague not only devastates the physical and social fabric of the village but also strips away the illusion of certainty, leaving characters to confront the **arbitrariness of life and death**. Brooks uses Anna's journey to show how pandemics force individuals—particularly women—to break free from the

constraints of gender and class, ultimately offering the possibility of **rebirth**. Anna's transformation from a servant to a healer reflects how, in the wake of a crisis, women are often able to step into new roles, challenging the very structures that once oppressed them.

Conclusion

In *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks explores the profound impact of the plague on both individuals and the broader community, with a particular focus on how pandemics disrupt **gender roles, social structures**, and personal identities. The novel intricately weaves themes of **fear, social disintegration, isolation, purification, and rebirth**, all viewed through the lens of **gender** and **intersectionality**.

The plague acts as a metaphor for the fragility of social bonds and patriarchal authority, as seen in the collapse of **Michael Mompellion's** moral leadership. Women like **Anna Frith** and **Elinor Mompellion** are central to the novel's exploration of how crises force individuals—especially women—to step into new roles of **leadership, caregiving, and healing**, roles that were previously restricted to men. Brooks uses this narrative to critique how women's knowledge and independence are often seen as threats to male-dominated structures, as illustrated in the **witch hunts** targeting **Mem and Anys Gowdie**.

Comparative works such as **Albert Camus' *The Plague***, **José Saramago's *Blindness***, and **Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower***, offer a broader understanding of how pandemics lead to **existential crises**, fear-driven **scapegoating**, and the marginalization of vulnerable groups, particularly women. These texts, along with Brooks' novel, demonstrate that pandemics not only reveal the fragility of societal structures but also offer spaces for **personal growth and transformation**, especially for those who were previously constrained by **gender** and **class**.

Ultimately, *Year of Wonders* serves as a compelling study of how pandemics force individuals to confront their identities, social roles, and the systems that once defined them. Through the lens of **gender** and **intersectionality**, Brooks offers a nuanced critique of how crises simultaneously destroy and create new possibilities for personal empowerment, particularly for women.

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