

In times of adversity and crisis, different individual respond in different ways. Discuss.

In Geraldine Brook's 2001 novel, "Year of Wonders", explores the way in which communities respond to crisis, both fearful and heroic. Set in middle England during the unsympathetic return of the plague in 1665 and 1666, readers are taken on an in depth journey through the life of the lead protagonist Anna Frith on an unprecedented scale. Through Anna's eyes the readers witness just how individuals respond in times of adversity. This is portrayed through the desperation and anxiety of some characters whilst others cling on tightly to their religious beliefs. The readers also encounter how individuals of lesser moral strength exploit others whilst some rise to the occasion and take the opportunity for personal growth.

The community of Eyam has neither the communal understanding of how disease spreads or resources to fight against it, so when faced with the repulsion of the bubonic plague confusion exacerbates desperation. Individuals such as John Gordon fall into the horrific trap of flagellation, believing this would "purify" him and his wife and protect them against the plague. "Flagellants! I feared it." Unsighted by his desperation, John Gordon tries to "allay God's wrath" but instead loses his life. Mr Talbot also fell victim to desperation as he is convinced that "if we burn the plague sores then the disease will surely follow". This action has no benefit but only worsens his condition. These extreme proceedings of the village people show just how the mentality of individuals may be distracted by arrays of belief. Brooks has used these characters as a symbol to show how the extreme beliefs of individuals may coarsely affect their actions when faced with crisis.

Religious beliefs provide support and motivation for many and in a catastrophe, they cling to this. This is shown through the beliefs that the plague is "a gift". As the Rector pleads to the villagers, they look up to him and believe that it is not punishment but "an opportunity" from God. The voluntary quarantine of the village is unique in that it was done out of faith. It is this faith that keep the villagers going to church when they are in such horrific circumstances. Even in the hot summer weather, the villagers are determined to continue going to church at the Cucklett Delf even though their chances of contracting the disease are much higher. Brooks uses the icon of religion as a vessel to show that faith and self belief can overcome all.

Others of less moral strength continue their selfish, destructive ways even exploiting others. Characters such as Aphra and Josiah use the rest of the villagers as scapegoats for all of their downfalls. After the oppression of a Puritan childhood, Josiah turns to a "spawn of Satan". He views the tragedy merely as an opportunity, and his materialism and insensitivity know no bounds. His ready exploitation of the dying and their families is so obvious that Anna is glad she no longer shares a name with him as his name became cursed in "every croft or cottage". It is his greediness that leads him to dead by "a knife through the hands". His wife Aphra, through the frustration and anger of the loss of her family, she resorts to exploiting the villagers for her own gain. The robbing of her desperate neighbours is both ingenious and unscrupulous. She too dies in the novel. Brooks uses these characters to show that in the end selfishness and greediness lead to extreme penalization. Others see the distressing plague as an opportunity for personal growth.

Catastrophe for some provides opportunity for personal growth. Anna is an immensely sympathetic protagonist who grows from being a “timid girl” to a woman who has “faced more terrors than many warriors”. “I wonder if you know how much you have changed”. Anna, not yet 20 years of age has been married, widowed, had children, lost them, became a farmer and a maid. Even though illiterate, she has a thriving passion for learning. Anna’s courage has been engorged by adversity, and is one of her most obvious and commendable qualities. It is through her courage that she takes up the mantle of “physick” (doctor), midwife and moral support to many in the community. Elinor teaches her to read and having witnessed and participated in previously unimaginable events, Anna develops into a worldly and strong independent woman. Brooks uses the chronological structure of the novel beginning in the middle of the story to demonstrate the changes in Anna. “I used to love this season”. Anna says this at the start to imply that something horrible has happened in Eyam that has led to her new found worldliness. Anna’s response to crisis was very heroic as compared to how other individuals responded.

In times of adversity and crisis, individuals respond differently, either fearfully or heroically. The readers are presented with a community with very little understanding of how disease spreads, so when faced with the horror of the bubonic plague many become desperate. These individuals cling to their religion as a sign of hope that things will get better. Some individuals lose their morals and exploit others in their desperation whilst the very strong rise to the occasion and use the tragedy as an opportunity for personal growth.