

from *A Journal of the Plague Year*

Fiction by Daniel Defoe



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

DID YOU KNOW?

Daniel Defoe ...

- was an undercover government spy.
- promoted several of his novels as memoirs.
- died while in hiding from creditors.

Meet the Author

Daniel Defoe 1660?–1731

Daniel Defoe has been hailed not only as a pioneer of modern journalism but also as the father of the English novel. Best known for *Robinson Crusoe* (page 590), the tale of a man's struggle for survival on a remote island, Defoe wrote more than 370 works, including novels, poems, histories, political and social commentaries, and essays, making him one of the most prolific writers of his day.

A Disastrous Childhood Defoe was born in London, probably in 1660, the year England reestablished itself as a monarchy. When Defoe was about five years old, bubonic plague broke out in London, taking the lives of thousands. A year later, a massive fire destroyed a considerable part of the city. Although Defoe and his family were spared, Defoe's childhood memories of how people coped with crisis and fear no doubt helped inform his writing.

A Daring Journalist

Defoe began writing political essays in 1683, working at various times on behalf of both Tory and Whig causes. He contributed articles to more than 26 publications and started

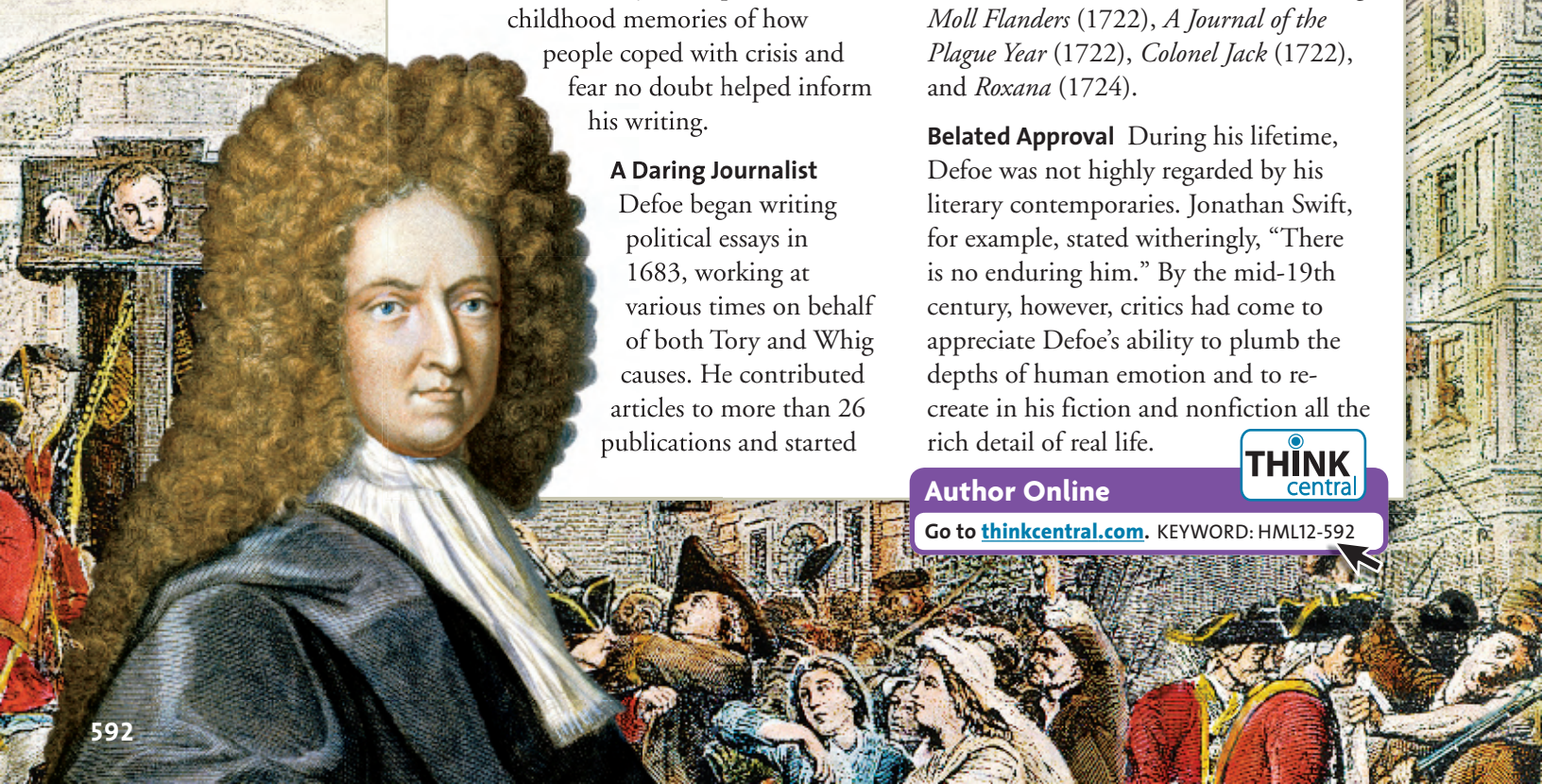
his own newspaper, the *Review*, writing nearly all the articles himself. He did not shy away from attacking government policies and was arrested more than once as a result of his inflammatory commentaries. In 1702, his writings landed him in the pillory, a wooden device with holes for the prisoner's head and hands. Prisoners in the pillory were usually pelted with rotten eggs and vegetables, but Defoe's views were so popular that people drank to his health and threw flowers instead.

Novel Approach Defoe did not write his first novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), until he was nearly 60 years old. It was tremendously successful, and he quickly published two *Crusoe* sequels, following them with several other novels, including *Moll Flanders* (1722), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), *Colonel Jack* (1722), and *Roxana* (1724).

Belated Approval During his lifetime, Defoe was not highly regarded by his literary contemporaries. Jonathan Swift, for example, stated witheringly, "There is no enduring him." By the mid-19th century, however, critics had come to appreciate Defoe's ability to plumb the depths of human emotion and to re-create in his fiction and nonfiction all the rich detail of real life.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-592



LITERARY ANALYSIS: VERISIMILITUDE

Unlike the diary of Samuel Pepys, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a work of fiction. The novel portrays London during the summer of 1665, the darkest days of the city's bubonic plague epidemic. An innovative writer, Defoe incorporated details from mortality records, city maps, and other historical documents to help him achieve **verisimilitude**, or the appearance of reality. Presented as an eyewitness account, the novel purposefully blurs the line between fact and fiction. In this way, Defoe's writing anticipates the realism and psychological depth of modern novels. As you read, notice how the following conventions help make the selection seem like an authentic report of the tragedy:

- a first-person narrator
- geographical names
- numbers and statistics
- precise details
- dates and references to time

READING SKILL: DRAW CONCLUSIONS

As you read the selection, use your own reactions and text clues to help you make **inferences**, or logical guesses, about the effects of the plague on London society. For example, you can infer that the epidemic caused a collapse of social customs, such as public mourning, from the following lines:

London might well be said to be all in tears; the mourners did not go about the streets indeed, for nobody put on black or made a formal dress of mourning for their nearest friends. . . .

Record your inferences in a chart like the one shown. After reading the selection, you will use these notes to **draw conclusions**, or make general statements, about the tragedy.

<i>Passages About London Society</i>	<i>My Reactions</i>	<i>My Inferences</i>
<i>"As near as I may judge, [the burial pit] was about forty feet in length, and about fifteen or sixteen feet broad, and . . . about nine feet deep. . . ."</i>	<i>The burial pit was so large. What a terrible sight it must have been!</i>	<i>The plague caused Londoners to change their burial practices. Mass graves were created.</i>

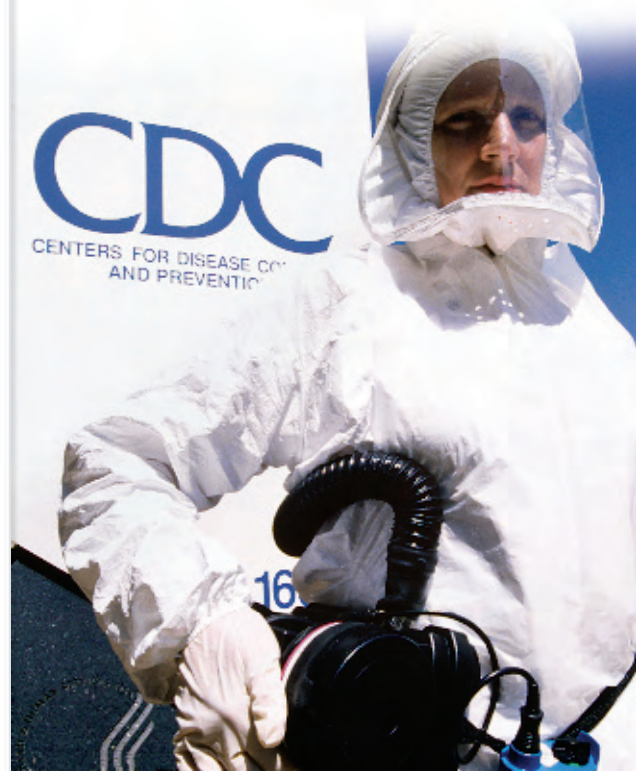


Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

How can a PLAGUE affect society?

As Daniel Defoe emphasizes in his novel, a plague can strike indiscriminately and unpredictably. Even today, with advanced medicine, diseases capable of triggering epidemics remain terrible threats to society.

DISCUSS Imagine that you and a small group of classmates are public health officials. You have just discovered several cases of a highly infectious disease that you fear may develop into an epidemic. Discuss the ways that you might work with different sectors of society—such as the media, politicians, and the elderly—to limit the spread of disease. Compare your ideas with those of other groups.



A JOURNAL of *the* **PLAGUE YEAR**

Daniel Defoe

BACKGROUND In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe chronicles the epidemic through the eyes of his narrator, a saddle maker known only as H. F. Early in the novel, as many people are fleeing the city, H. F. agonizes over whether he too should leave London. After reading a passage in the Bible, he decides to stay and to do what he can for those in need, trusting that God will keep him from falling victim to “the noisome pestilence.”

Analyze Visuals ►

What details in the engraving reveal the terrible circumstances of the plague outbreak?

The face of London was now indeed strangely altered, I mean the whole mass of buildings, city, liberties, suburbs, Westminster, Southwark, and altogether; for as to the particular part called the city, or within the walls, that was not yet much infected. But in the whole the face of things, I say, was much altered; sorrow and sadness sat upon every face; and though some parts were not yet overwhelmed, yet all looked deeply concerned; and, as we saw it apparently coming on, so every one looked on himself and his family as in the utmost danger. Were it possible to represent those times exactly to those that did not see them, and give the reader due ideas of the horror that
10 everywhere presented itself, it must make just impressions upon their minds and fill them with surprise. London might well be said to be all in tears; the mourners did not go about the streets indeed, for nobody put on black or made a formal dress of mourning for their nearest friends; but the voice of mourning was truly heard in the streets. 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, that it was enough to pierce the stoutest heart in the world to hear them. 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
20 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. . . . **A**

I went all the first part of the time freely about the streets, though not so freely as to run myself into apparent danger, except when they dug the great

2 city: the portion of London once within the old city walls, with Westminster to the west and Southwark (sūth'ərĕk) to the south; **liberties:** densely populated areas just outside the city walls.

A DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 14–22. Which details suggest that the plague caused family relationships and friendships to fall apart?

The Great Pit in Aldgate (1865), Davenport after Cruikshank. © Science Museum Library/Science and Society Picture Library.



25 parish of Aldgate: The street and area known as Aldgate take their name from the nearby old gate, or Aldgate.

33 Whitechapel: an area just east of Aldgate and the old city walls.

B VERISIMILITUDE
Review Defoe's use of **numbers**, **dates**, and **statistics** in lines 25–49. Would the description of the Aldgate burial pit be as compelling without these details? Explain your response.

C VERISIMILITUDE
The narrator recounts information about Aldgate and Finsbury, actual areas of London struck by the epidemic. How might Defoe's original audience have reacted to reading these familiar **geographical names**?

66 sexton: a church officer or employee in charge of maintaining church property.

pit in the churchyard of our parish of Aldgate. A terrible pit it was, and I could not resist my curiosity to go and see it. As near as I may judge, it was about forty feet in length, and about fifteen or sixteen feet broad, and, at the time I first looked at it, about nine feet deep; but it was said they dug it near twenty feet deep afterwards in one part of it, till they could go no deeper
30 for the water; for they had, it seems, dug several large pits before this. For though the plague was long a-coming to our parish, yet, when it did come, there was no parish in or about London where it raged with such violence as in the two parishes of Aldgate and Whitechapel. . . .

They had supposed this pit would have supplied them for a month or more when they dug it, and some blamed the churchwardens for suffering such a frightful thing, telling them they were making preparations to bury the whole parish, and the like; but time made it appear the churchwardens knew the condition of the parish better than they did, for the pit being finished the 4th of September, I think, they began to bury in it the 6th,
40 and by the 20th, which was just two weeks, they had thrown into it 1,114 bodies when they were obliged to fill it up, the bodies being then come to lie within six feet of the surface. . . .

It was about the 10th of September that my curiosity led, or rather drove, me to go and see this pit again, when there had been near 400 people buried in it; and I was not content to see it in the daytime, as I had done before, for then there would have been nothing to have been seen but the loose earth; for all the bodies that were thrown in were immediately covered with earth by those they called the buriers, which at other times were called bearers; but I resolved to go in the night and see some of them thrown in. **B**

50 There was a strict order to prevent people coming to those pits, and that was only to prevent infection. But after some time that order was more necessary, for people that were infected and near their end, and delirious also, would run to those pits, wrapt in blankets or rugs, and throw themselves in, and, as they said, bury themselves. I cannot say that the officers suffered any willingly to lie there; but I have heard that in a great pit in Finsbury, in the parish of Cripplegate, it lying open then to the fields, for it was not then walled about, [some] came and threw themselves in, and expired there, before they threw any earth upon them; and that when they came to bury others and found them there, they were quite dead,
60 though not cold. **C**

This may serve a little to describe the dreadful condition of that day, though it is impossible to say anything that is able to give a true idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this, that it was indeed very, very, very dreadful, and such as no tongue can express.

I got admittance into the churchyard by being acquainted with the sexton who attended, who, though he did not refuse me at all, yet earnestly persuaded me not to go, telling me very seriously, for he was a good, religious, and sensible man, that it was indeed their business and duty to venture, and to run all hazards, and that in it they might hope to
70 be preserved; but that I had no apparent call to it but my own curiosity,

which, he said, he believed I would not pretend was sufficient to justify my running that hazard. I told him I had been pressed in my mind to go, and that perhaps it might be an instructing sight, that might not be without its uses. "Nay," says the good man, "if you will venture upon that score, name of God go in; for, depend upon it, 't will be a sermon to you, it may be, the best that ever you heard in your life. 'T is a speaking sight," says he, "and has a voice with it, and a loud one, to call us all to repentance;" and with that he opened the door and said, "Go, if you will."

His discourse had shocked my resolution a little, and I stood wavering for
80 a good while, but just at that interval I saw two links come over from the end of the Minories, and heard the bellman, and then appeared a dead-cart, as they called it, coming over the streets; so I could no longer resist my desire of seeing it, and went in. There was nobody, as I could perceive at first, in the churchyard, or going into it, but the buriers and the fellow that drove the cart, or rather led the horse and cart; but when they came up to the pit they saw a man go to and again, muffled up in a brown cloak, and making motions with his hands under his cloak, as if he was in a great agony, and the buriers immediately gathered about him, supposing he was one of those
90 bury themselves. He said nothing as he walked about, but two or three times groaned very deeply and loud, and sighed as he would break his heart.

When the buriers came up to him they soon found he was neither a person infected and desperate, as I have observed above, or a person distempered in mind, but one oppressed with a dreadful weight of grief indeed, having his wife and several of his children all in the cart that was just come in with him, and he followed in an agony and excess of sorrow. He mourned heartily, as it was easy to see, but with a kind of masculine grief that could not give itself vent by tears; and calmly defying the buriers to let him alone, said he would only see the bodies thrown in and go away,
100 so they left importuning him. But no sooner was the cart turned round and the bodies shot into the pit promiscuously, which was a surprise to him, for he at least expected they would have been decently laid in, though indeed he was afterwards convinced that was impracticable; I say, no sooner did he see the sight but he cried out aloud, unable to contain himself. I could not hear what he said, but he went backward two or three steps and fell down in a swoon. The buriers ran to him and took him up, and in a little while he came to himself, and they led him away to the Pie Tavern over against the end of Houndsditch, where, it seems, the man was known, and where they took care of him. He looked into the pit again as he went away, but the
110 buriers had covered the bodies so immediately with throwing in earth, that though there was light enough, for there were lanterns, and candles in them, placed all night round the sides of the pit, upon heaps of earth, seven or eight, or perhaps more, yet nothing could be seen. **D**

This was a mournful scene indeed, and affected me almost as much as the rest; but the other was awful and full of terror. The cart had in it sixteen or seventeen bodies; some were wrapt up in linen sheets, some in rags, some

74–75 if you will venture . . . go in: If you will go in for that reason, in the name of God, go in.

80 links: torches.

81–82 Minories: a street running from Aldgate to the Tower of London; **bellman . . . dead-cart:** In front of a cart bearing the dead away, a bellman walked ahead, ringing a bell and crying, "Bring out your dead!"

94 distempered: afflicted with distemper, or disorder, of the mind; deranged; mentally disturbed.

101 promiscuously (prə-mĭs'kyō-əs-lē): without sorting or discrimination; without making distinctions.

108 Houndsditch: a street on the site of an old ditch running northwest along the city wall between Aldgate and Bishopsgate.


D DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 79–113. Contrast the actions of the desperate man to those of the buriers. Whose response to the plague is more disturbing? Explain your thoughts.

little other than naked, or so loose that what covering they had fell from them in the shooting out of the cart, and they fell quite naked among the rest; but the matter was not much to them, or the indecency much to any
120 one else, seeing they were all dead, and were to be huddled together into the common grave of mankind, as we may call it, for here was no difference made, but poor and rich went together; there was no other way of burials, neither was it possible there should, for coffins were not to be had for the prodigious numbers that fell in such a calamity as this. . . .

I had some little obligations, indeed, upon me to go to my brother's house, which was in Coleman Street parish, and which he had left to my care, and I went at first every day, but afterwards only once or twice a week.

In these walks I had many dismal scenes before my eyes, as particularly of persons falling dead in the streets, terrible shrieks and screechings of women,
130 who, in their agonies, would throw open their chamber windows and cry out in a dismal, surprising manner. It is impossible to describe the variety of postures in which the passions of the poor people would express themselves. . . . People in the rage of the distemper, or in the torment of their swellings, which was indeed intolerable, running out of their own government, raving and distracted, and oftentimes laying violent hands upon themselves, throwing themselves out at their windows, shooting themselves, etc.; mothers murdering their own children in their lunacy, some dying of mere grief as a passion, some of mere fright and surprise without any infection at all, others frightened into idiotism and foolish distractions, some into despair
140 and lunacy, others into melancholy madness. . . . **E**

I heard of one infected creature who, running out of his bed in his shirt in the anguish and agony of his swellings, of which he had three upon him, got his shoes on and went to put on his coat; but the nurse resisting, and snatching the coat from him, he threw her down, ran over her, ran downstairs and into the street, directly to the Thames in his shirt, the nurse running after him, and calling to the watch to stop him; but the watchman, frightened at the man, and afraid to touch him, let him go on; upon which he ran down to the Stillyard stairs, threw away his shirt, and plunged into the Thames, and, being a good swimmer, swam quite over the river; and the
150 tide being coming in, as they call it, that is, running westward, he reached the land not till he came about the Falcon stairs, where landing, and finding no people there, it being in the night, he ran about the streets there, naked as he was, for a good while, when, it being by that time high water, he takes the river again, and swam back to the Stillyard, landed, ran up the streets again to his own house, knocking at the door, went up the stairs and into his bed again; and that this terrible experiment cured him of the plague, that is to say, that the violent motion of his arms and legs stretched the parts where the swellings he had upon him were, that is to say, under his arms and his groin, and caused them to ripen and break, and that the cold of the water
160 abated the fever in his blood. 

Language Coach

Denotations and Connotations

The feelings or images connected to a word are the word's **connotations**. How do the connotations of *huddled* (line 120) differ from those of its synonyms *grouped* and *nestled*?

126 Coleman Street parish: an area about half a mile west of the narrator's parish.

133 swellings: Bubonic plague is characterized by the painful swelling of inflamed lymph glands, or buboes.

134 running . . . government: losing the ability to control themselves.

E VERISIMILITUDE

In lines 128–140, the **first-person narrator** describes the horrors of London's infected parishes. How might your sense of the epidemic be different if a third-person narrator described the scene?

146 watch: the night watch, which patrolled and guarded the city at night.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does the narrator want to visit the Aldgate burial pit at night?
2. **Clarify** Why does the sexton try to prevent the narrator from entering the burial grounds?
3. **Summarize** What horrors does the narrator witness during regular walks to his brother's house?



READING 5A Analyze how complex plot structures and devices function and advance the action in a work of fiction. **RC-12(B)** Make complex inferences about text and use textual evidence to support understanding.

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences About the Narrator** Reread lines 23–49. Is the narrator compassionate, aggressive, or some combination of these? Support your answer with specific details.
5. **Interpret Imagery and Mood** Find several examples of sensory imagery—or words and phrases that appeal to the senses—in lines 1–22. What overall mood, or atmosphere, do these vivid images help create?
6. **Analyze Verisimilitude** Reread lines 79–124, about the narrator's encounter with the desperate man. What aspects of verisimilitude make the most impact in this scene? Review the list of conventions on page 593, if necessary.
7. **Draw Conclusions** Look over the **inferences** you recorded as you read the selection. Summarize the effects of the plague on various members of London society. What social customs and institutions did the epidemic of 1665 alter or destroy? Support your conclusion with evidence from the text.
8. **Compare Texts** Compare Defoe's work with *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (page 580). Which author presents the more memorable account of London during the Restoration? Cite details from the texts to support your response.

Literary Criticism

9. **Historical Context** In Defoe's day, any advice doctors might offer on what caused disease was based on suspicion and guesswork. How might modern society's response to a widespread outbreak of disease differ from the response Defoe describes in *A Journal of the Plague Year*?

*How can a **PLAGUE** affect society?*

Defoe published *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, just decades after the actual epidemic struck London. Do you think Defoe wanted to create a moving, realistic portrayal of the suffering caused by the plague or did he want to exploit that suffering to provide readers with a sensational, shocking read? Explain your reasons.