Chapter 11

Echo: The Black Death and AIDS

This activity corresponds to “The Black Death and AIDS” feature in your textbook. The following questions are designed to help you comprehend the parallel between these two plagues. Once you have answered the questions in the Comprehension section, submit your answers and move on to the questions in the Analysis and Outside Sources sections. Each section is designed to build upon the one before it, taking you deeper into the subject you are studying. After you have answered all of the questions, you will have the option of emailing your responses to your instructor.

Introduction

Say the word AIDS to anyone living in the last decades of the twentieth century, and the word plague immediately comes to mind. The original plague, the so-called Black Death, was a constant and recurring epidemic from 1348 until 1660. During the rampages of the Black Death, Europe suffered the loss of close to half of its population and suffered tremendous psychological effects as well. The millions of people lost to AIDS, especially in the underdeveloped nations of Africa, continue to this date without significant abatement. The devastation of the plague was rampant, while the AIDS epidemic is ameliorated by the existence of medications, which can mitigate the threat of an imminent death by prolonging life for years. Unfortunately, where the drugs are not available, death is inescapable for most, leaving millions of children as orphans.

Comprehension

1. What was the impact of the Black Death upon Europe in the fourteenth century?

2. What has the comparative impact of the AIDS epidemic been, especially in the developing world?

3. Why does AIDS have less of an impact in the United States today as compared with the 1980s?

Analysis

1. What kind of effect would you expect the Black Death to have upon the creative world of European art in the fourteenth century?

2. What would distinguish the prognosis for a carrier of AIDS as opposed to the victim of the Black Death?

3. Is the word plague outmoded? Discuss the emotional baggage that the word carries. Should we abandon such a word in a world where medicine seems to
come up with cures or long-term therapeutic medicines to prolong lives in spite of these life-threatening diseases?

Outside Sources

1. Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* describes the story-telling antics of a group of people trying to escape the plague. Read some of the tales. Are these storytellers escapists, or are they “dancing on the gallows”?

2. *Angels in America*, written during the height of American concern with the threat of AIDS, takes an activist view about the disease. It discusses the disease openly and defies the disease to do its worst. Read this in-your-face manifesto against AIDS or watch the HBO film version of the original two-part play. Discuss your interpretations of *Angels in America*. Do you agree with the point of view it conveys?