

Connor Dalton

Mrs. Lattin

Seminar

05/02/2024

What We Can Learn from the Coronavirus

It seems impossible to believe that four years have passed since the massive coronavirus pandemic first hit the world. What was once an obscure germ — one only those who studied microbiology knew about — had become something so big that it caused the entire world to shut down. While there is no more pandemic and the coronavirus isn't as prevalent as it was, it has caused massive change in how life works today. Considering how greatly the world was affected by this virus, there are many things that we can learn from it. To better understand its impact, we will go over major events that were a cause of the coronavirus pandemic; taking a more in-depth look at what happened and comparing them with literature — specifically George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. Also, previous history, and the insight of various philosophers will also be used to find meaningful insight that can be applied in these current times.

The first records of COVID-19, the variant of the coronavirus that was responsible for the outbreak, were found at the tail end of 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization took protective measures in China and toward any tourist that might have come into contact with COVID-19. But as the number of people getting infected increased, some even dying from the disease, the World Health Organization ultimately made the decision, in early March of 2020, to lockdown and issue social distancing regulations. This would force any 'nonessential' settings such as schools, workplaces, and social events to either meet remotely or be canceled altogether.

This meant that almost all businesses had to stop operating — forcing millions of workers and students to remain at home. The federal government would soon enforce these regulations and jointly instruct us to stock up on food and other supplies (CDC).

These quarantines and social distancing regulations were controversial at best, and are still a point of contention towards the government. It begs the question whether world leaders were justified in enforcing quarantines, or if they were overreacting. If you weren't reading the news too closely back when this was happening, your knowledge of COVID-19 was most likely that it was just a more contagious version of a cold virus with the only chance of death being found in people with other medical conditions. If you thought this way, like I did, then the solution seemed obvious: to just treat it like it was a cold, making sure to stay away from those who could be seriously affected. And while it is true that those with weaker immune systems are more susceptible, the truth is that anyone could have their life threatened if they caught it. Along with that, those who have been infected with the virus may not show symptoms until weeks after they've caught it, if they show symptoms at all. That, the possibility of death for anyone who caught COVID-19, and the extremely contagious nature of the virus lets us know that the World Health Organization's decision to quarantine was not made in blind panic, but in caution (WHO).

Some of their precautions were in fact justified, but there were many who thought they weren't. While there were many realistic concerns regarding the lockdown, like the loss of income and the impact lockdowns would have on education, many reasons were ridiculous, such as the inconvenience and boredom of staying inside; an overconfidence in one's own immune system; or not trusting the government. There is an underlying theme (and problem) between all these frivolous arguments: ignorance. Whatever the reasoning of those who thought the precautions were excessive was, we neglected to take the time to understand what was happening

and formed a judgment only on immediate circumstances and word of mouth. To better understand this point, we need to take a look at George Orwell's novel *1984*.

In *1984* we follow average citizen Winston Smith inside the state of Oceania, a totalitarian hellscape ruled by a mysterious figure known as Big Brother and enforced by an organization called the Party. Everything in Oceania has been perfectly crafted to brainwash its civilians into being complacent about whatever war crimes Oceania commits. Individuality is stripped from every person; every single building is heavily monitored with cameras; history is censored and destroyed; entire new languages are made to limit thought. And if anyone has so much of a thought opposing Big Brother or the Party, they are cruelly tortured, killed, and forgotten about. While *1984* has created a lot of tropes we see in dystopian literature today, Orwell makes an interesting narrative choice that I haven't seen made in other dystopian stories before, one that also supports this paper's thesis.

In dystopian stories, we typically spend time focusing on the dictator in charge and see the mechanisms and tactics they use to control their population. But in *1984*, while we do get to see the many divisions of the Party and how each of them are able to keep Oceania in control, we only get to see Big Brother once throughout the entire story. It happens within the very first chapter on page 16 after a disturbing ritual called the "Two Minutes Hate", where citizens gather around a screen and violently scream at the political enemies of Oceania. Once this daily routine is finally over, Big Brother makes his only appearance, and what he says is actually omitted from the reader. The narration takes over and states: "Nobody heard what Big Brother was saying. It was merely a few words of encouragement, the sort of words that are uttered in the din of battle, not distinguishable individually but restoring confidence by the fact of being spoken" (16).

This quotation, and the sequence before it, not only show how much influence Big Brother has over Oceania, but also puts on display how mindless its citizens are. Throughout the entire book almost everyone we meet sings their praises about how much they love Big Brother; about how smart he is; about how great of a leader he is. But the passage stating that no one listens to him proves that their words are hollow. No one loves Big Brother. Some might fear him, but the only reason why the people of Oceania stay in line is because they ignore every thought that doesn't involve serving Big Brother. They become no more than moths following a lighter's blaze, foregoing any common sense that is beyond the obvious.

While we aren't fighting totalitarian governments that try to control our thoughts, this statement about ignorance can still be applied today. Instead of Big Brother getting in the way of free thought, it's our own laziness and incompetence that gets in the way of making better choices. Too often people will make poor decisions because they refuse to understand or even acknowledge what will happen, or what has happened before. This is what happened during COVID-19. When some of us heard about a new disease from China, we did very little to no research about what was happening and dismissed it, deeming it not worth our time.

There are similar arguments about ignorance that can also be made for the people who did the opposite: those who heard about COVID-19 and panicked. Notoriously, once the first cases of COVID-19 in the United States were reported and the government gave their orders to stockpile and lockdown, there became a mass panic amongst its citizens. People started to frantically buy and hoard extreme amounts of food, water, and necessities. And with how quickly COVID-19 spread, and China additionally withholding certain goods from leaving the country, suppliers were unable to properly prepare and provide, leading to massive shortages across the world (Bowden and Golding).

COVID-19 was still fairly dangerous, but there were over exaggerations of its deadliness that were bloated by news outlets and other media sources. These were the articles that caught the attention of the overly anxious and gullible, leading to this overreaction. Additionally, the panic buying was so great that not only people who were in need, but even those who could support themselves felt it. These examples of gullibility and disregard for fellow men are more clear signs of ignorance. It is these issues of irrationality and gullibility that Arthur Miller lends insight to with his play *The Crucible*.

The Crucible takes place in Salem, Massachusetts in the late 1600's during the infamous Salem Witch Trials where we follow John Proctor, a proud and prideful man who is hiding his love affair with Abigail Williams from his wife Elizabeth. As the play progresses, we see the town of Salem devolve into chaos as more and more of its citizens are consumed by the superstition of witchcraft and demonic occurrences. Neighbors and families turn against each other; and John, Abigail, and other side characters eventually get caught in the crossfire. They are then illogically scrutinized and imprisoned; with some even getting executed. It is important to note that *The Crucible* was written during the height of the Red Scare of the 1950s to draw a parallel to the extreme measures taken by the American government's efforts to weed out communists which efforts were no more paranoid, irrational, and harmful than what happened in Salem 260 years before.

There is a great exchange that helps put this hysteria into perspective that can be found partway through the second scene of the first act. Mary Warren, the easily influenced servant of Proctors, interrupts an argument they are having, and in a panic exclaims that a woman named Goody Osburn has been convicted and will soon be hanged for witchcraft. Both of the Proctors are shocked and refuse to believe this, especially John. He demands an explanation from Mary,

and she, with full certainty that it was true, tells them that Goody had confessed to dealing with Satan. John angrily asks Mary for proof, and she naively retells the events that happened during Goody's trial. She recalls that the judge had asked Goody what curses she had apparently been caught mumbling, to which Goody denied, claiming her mumblings were simply her personal commandments.

Mary: ". . .but then Judge Hathorne say, 'Recite for us your commandments!'—and of all the ten she could not say a single one. She never knew no commandments, and they had her in a flat lie!"

Proctor: "And so condemned her?"

Mary: "(Impatient at his stupidity.) Why, they must when she condemned herself."

Proctor: "But the proof, the proof?"

Mary: "(With greater impatience with him.) I told you the proof—it's hard proof, hard as rock the judges said." (32-33).

This moment amazingly highlights the flaws of irrationality, prejudice, and mob mentality within just a few pages. During the Salem Witch Trials, the most common proof that someone had been dealing with witchcraft and demons was that there was no proof that they hadn't. People were guilty until proven innocent, and since the people in Salem who were making these accusations were usually those with lots of power and/or charm, people were more inclined to believe the accusers and their accusations. And since people believed in the accusations, more joined in, creating a general consensus, rather than a possibility.

This process of baseless assumption and the domino effect of blind faith that follows is exactly what Arthur Miller wanted to criticize in *The Crucible*, and more than 50 years later (Miller), these problems can be seen happening during COVID-19 as well. When news of

COVID-19 came out, the poor communication and judgment from both the federal government and citizens meant COVID-19 was misinterpreted as a world-ending threat, which resulted in panic. People then reported false information to their friends and family, frightening them as well. When their neighbors saw them panicking, they too began to panic—either joining them in the same misunderstanding or fearing the potential damage that would come.

Now would be the time to make an important distinction regarding ignorance and ignoring in general, that being that these things aren't inherently bad by themselves. When it comes to the act of ignoring, people will generally prioritize tasks that they deem more important or exciting than others, and while it can be done detrimentally or even maliciously, ignoring certain aspects of an environment is vital for productivity (Peels) (Rosen). Regarding ignorance, according to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, ignorance means "lack of knowledge, education, or awareness." It should be argued that no one is stupid for not knowing about a subject they weren't made aware of. A chemist isn't stupid for not knowing how to manage construction, nor is an architect stupid for not knowing how to make medicine. Ignorance in this sense should be taken as an opportunity to grow, learn and improve. It is when these two actions are taken together that they become a problem. It becomes the act of not understanding a situation, yet not taking proper time to understand it, and proceeding to take action.

This is the type of ignorance that was present during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government was irresponsible by causing its citizens to panic, who themselves were ignorant for doing so. The people who didn't quarantine were ignorant too, as their rebellions were done without thinking clearly about the situation that was present. Ignorance like this is not new to the world; there are many examples that can be seen throughout history, such as the aforementioned Salem Witch Trials. This has left many to ponder what we as a society can do to combat

ignorance. Many have given their proposals, but none are as intelligent as what Immanuel Kant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau have to say in their respective essays. While these three different texts are not affiliated in their origins, they share many ideas that can be applied today.

To start, the first essay is *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, In which Immanuel Kant aims to answer the question posed by the title. In his essay, Kant explains that the freedom to think and speak is the way to enlightenment, but the subservience imposed onto us either by society or our own laziness tries to prevent the expression of freedom. Kant then expresses that we must persist in a liberty of mind, even if it means challenging societal and self-sanctioned norms. The second paper is *Self-Reliance*, written by Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his essay, Emerson describes the importance of being self-reliant and the ability to trust oneself. He explains that non-conformity is the only way one can truly live, and that one must explore and find what is good, rather than be told. Emerson goes on to write that we should be unwavering in our beliefs of what is right, only influenced by ourselves and nothing else. This leaves the final essay of the three, which is *Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau. In it he discusses what to do when faced with unjust laws, systems, and governments. Thoreau states that if there is any wrongful aspect within a government, we must do all that we can to fight it. In his own words: “If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go; . . .” (5).

While these essays have different subject matter they approach and issues they tackle, there are many similarities between each of the solutions their authors recommend. Kant’s strategies for reaching enlightenment; Emerson’s strong beliefs in self-reliance; and Thoreau’s refusal to ever uphold a corrupt regime — all of their thoughts point to one conclusive truth:

individuals should be free in their thinking, firm in their understanding, and fearless in attacking problems when they arise. When the public are free to think, they are able to express their right to live which allows them to train such skills as critical, analytical, and insightful thinking.

Despite being at the core of America's values, free thought has been somewhat lost in the modern age. Manipulation and lies are able to reach many people much more quickly with inventions such as social media and television, and the general dampened spirit of people means more are inclined to just go through the motions and leave someone else to make the decisions. This is why it is so important to be a free thinker today. In a world where not thinking will be taken advantage of, someone who actively does consider the world around them will be massively ahead of the crowd. But even those who are able to see through the deception are encouraged to mute themselves with an onslaught of distractions or outright violence, so one must be unshakable in their thoughts as well. They must be able to stand firmly against anything that might come their way, unafraid of the consequences and willing to hold others accountable. Following these principles will for certain ensure that whoever does will keep themselves, and others completely and truly free.

If there's anything that should be taken away from this, it should be this quote from the court drama *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee. It comes just before the third trial session for Bertram Cates, where his religiously biased town has condemned him for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution at the school. Inside the empty courtroom his lawyer Henry Drummond converses with him, where he shares a childhood story with Cates. He describes how at seven years old he wished for a beautiful golden rocking horse but was too poor to afford it. Then on his birthday his parents were able to save enough money to give the horse to him, but it immediately broke. Drummond then addresses Cates and shares with him what he

learned from the experience: “. . .whenever you see something bright, shining, perfect-seeming—all gold, with purple spots—look behind the paint! And if it’s a lie—show it up for what it really is!” (110).

Self-reliance is the key to this world. Being able to think, defend, and fight for oneself is the greatest skill anyone could have, and while this is true, there is one more missing component to it all. This is the virtue of trust. No single person will ever have all the correct solutions to every situation; that is why it is equally important for them to be willing to trust, and agree with their fellow men. Of course, not everyone is trustworthy, but that is yet another reason we need to be observant. COVID-19 and the chaos that followed made humanity complacent in its flaws; willing to trade their freedom for immediate pleasures. So, while the effort and opposition may be great, whoever lives by these ideas will become unshakable towards any man, system or pandemic that could come their way.

Works Cited

- CDC. “CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 15 Mar. 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>.
- World Health Organization: WHO. “Coronavirus.” *World Health Organization: WHO*, 10 Jan. 2020, https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1.
- World Health Organization: WHO. “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19): How Is It Transmitted?” *World Health Organization: WHO*, 23 Dec. 2021,

<https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-how-is-it-transmitted>.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 1949. New American Library, 1961.

Bowden, Ebony, and Bruce Golding. “Trump Administration Weighs Legal Action over Alleged Chinese Hoarding of PPE.” *New York Post*, 5 Apr. 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/05/trump-admin-weighs-legal-action-over-alleged-chinese-hoarding-of-ppe/>.

Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible: Drama in Two Acts*. 1953. Dramatists Play Service Inc, 1982.

Miller, Arthur. “Why I Wrote ‘The Crucible.’” *The New Yorker*, 14 Oct. 1996, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/21/why-i-wrote-the-crucible>.

Rosen, Jill. “Ability to Ignore Is a Key Part of Paying Attention, Johns Hopkins Study Finds.” *The Hub*, 26 Feb. 2016, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2016/02/26/ignore-to-pay-attention/>.

Peels, Rik. “What Is Ignorance?” *Springer Nature*, 1 May 2010, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226906490_What_Is_Ignorance.

Merriam-Webster, “Ignorance.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ignorance>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2024.

Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* 1784. Translated by Ted Murphy, Hackett Publishing, 1992.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance*. 1841. Strelbytskyy Multimedia Publishing, 2023.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobedience*. Open Road Media, 2015.

Lawrence, Jerome, and Robert E. Lee. *Inherit the Wind: The Powerful Drama of the Greatest Courtroom Clash of the Century*. Ballantine Books, 2003.

