

Literary Criticism

Crisis Sociology and Nature in Literature: How Crisis Influences Personal and Societal Fabrics in *The Nightingale* (2015) and *Year of Wonders* (2001)

Reine Fawaz

Abstract

This paper examines the parallels in micro-sociological and macro-sociological changes during times of crisis, as seen in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* (2015) and Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders* (2001). Both novels provide compelling representations of individuals and communities being reshaped during adversity: World War II France in *The Nightingale* and the Black Plague in 1665 Eyam in *Year of Wonders*. This paper examines the influence of crisis on two levels – first, commenting on the community's morality, traditions, and power dynamics on a macrosociology level, and second, discussing the surfacing of one's true nature, their beliefs, and their mentality, on a microsociology level. Using sociological theory and through a comparative reading of *The Nightingale* and *Year of Wonders*, this paper proves that the sociological transformation of individuals and communities during crisis remains consistent across countries and throughout time. The paper also uses the biophilia theory to study the recurring theme of nature and to prove that people go back to the environment to gain a sense of control during the unknown.

Keywords: microsociology, macrosociology, crisis, morals, community, grief, anxiety, nature

Introduction

Crises, whether war or disease, have the ability to reshape societies and individuals, but is this transformation consistent regardless of time and place? Through a comparative analysis of the two novels, *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah (2015) set in France during WW2, and *Year of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks (2001) set in Eyam, England, during 1665, this paper uses sociological theory to try to show how the community's morals, faith, and power dynamics shifts during adversity. It also aims to prove that, in difficult times, individuals discover their true nature and beliefs. Additionally, in alignment with the biophilia hypothesis, the paper explores why individuals return to nature in periods of adversity. The two novels, set more than a century apart and in different regions, provide a strong foundation for this research. By comparing and assessing their portrayals of duress in discrepant settings, this paper aims to prove that individuals' and society's sociological transformation remains constant and that nature helps individuals cope with their emotions and understand their situations.

Crisis shapes people. It helps them discover who they truly are, and it helps exploit the communities' strengths and weaknesses. Hannah's *The Nightingale* follows two sisters trying to survive the second world war in occupied France. Brooks's *Year of Wonders* (2001), on the other hand, follows a widowed mother trying to survive the bubonic plague. While these narratives are completely different in story and timelines, a comparative analysis shows the similarities in the transformation of characters (microsociology), and of their community (macrosociology). Microsociology focuses on both small-scale interactions between individuals and ethnomethodology, how people shape their world-view through conversation. Some examples that fall under microsociology are beliefs and perceptions. As for macrosociology, like the name suggests, it examines society as a whole. It explores power dynamics, inequality, cultures, and values (Amzat & Maigari, 2021, p.83)

Year of Wonders shows how Anna struggles with her faith. She finds her strength and discovers her true nature, as a caring, superstitious and hard-working woman. Furthermore, the novel shows how the epidemic turns the individuals of the community into selfish, murderous accusers. On the other hand, *The Nightingale* shows Vianne discovering she's an independent survivor who doesn't need men to solve her problems. As for the community, war turns its citizens into sacrificing and monstrous individuals. Both novels show how Vianne, the eldest sister in *The Nightingale*, and Anna in *Year of Wonders* cope through nature, a reading which aligns with the biophilia hypothesis that explores why people resort to nature to relieve stress, cope and gain a sense of control (Kellert et al., 2011). To elaborate, Vianne goes to an apple tree in her garden to mourn and hope, while Anna translates the plague into the environment she's familiar with, and for mourning. She tries to explain the plague by referencing rocks, mud, and the rotten apples that fell from the tree.

Though *The Nightingale* has been examined in articles analyzing Vianne's sister Isabelle using the feminist approach (Ali & Yunita, 2020), resistance (Putra, 2022), and historical events (Hikmah, 2023), and though *Year of Wonders* has invited a published article about witchcraft, misogyny, and about the role of mothers during a pandemic (Biswas, 2020), there are no articles comparing the two novels or analyzing them from a sociological perspective: From a macrosociology perspective, how do the society's morals and power dynamics change? From a microsociology perspective, does crisis reveal a person's true nature? Does it lead to loss of faith? How does a character's psyche change during isolation? Why do they resort to nature to make sense of their hardship? Thus, through a close reading of Hannah's and Brooks's novels' exploration of character and community

development through a war and an epidemic, respectively, this paper argues that the micro and macro sociological changes in crisis are identical regardless of distance and time and that coping mechanisms and methods of comprehension of those hardships are similar as well.

The analysis builds on a number of thematic and/or theoretical outputs. Tolmacheva et al. (2021) provide information on morality during a pandemic. Banerjee et al. (2020) discuss othering, blame, and witch healers. Drazkiewicz and Panczová (2022), and Paine (1967), explore gossip and conspiracy theories. As for Kellert et al. (2011), his book explains the biophilia hypothesis. Barbalet (1992) explains the macrosociology of emotions, and Schumaker (1992) explores the relation between religion and mental wellbeing. From the microsociology side, the discussion focuses on the change in the main characters, their beliefs, and interactions in the community. From the macrosociology side, the analysis scrutinizes the transformation in the societal values and culture. The paper also invokes the biophilia hypothesis to show how the main characters in each novel go back to nature to try to make sense of, cope with, and gain agency over, their situations.

Plot Summaries

Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* follows the lives of Vianne and her sister, Isabelle, during the fall of France at the hands of the Nazis. Isabelle joins a resistance movement. She helps fallen allies escape Nazi-occupied lands through the Pyrenees Mountains to Spain. She earns the nickname Nightingale because of this trek. In the end she gets captured and sent to a concentration camp but makes it home before dying a few days later. As for Vianne, her husband has to join the army and she is left to care for their daughter, Sophie. A Nazi soldier, Captain Beck, billets at her house. He treats her well, but she ends up killing him to protect her sister. A new soldier replaces him, Von Richter. He rapes her and talks down to her. When the Nazis start taking Jews away, Vianne takes her best friend's kid and raises him as her own. She then goes on to help even more Jewish children with the help of the orphanage.

Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders* follows Anna, a widow, as she navigates her life in a plague-stricken town in England. The first patient to get infected is George Viccars, a tailor residing at Anna's place. Viccars and her two sons die, and Anna is left alone. The town decides to quarantine itself from nearby residential areas to avoid spreading the plague. Anna joins the Mompellions, the Anglican preacher and his wife, to help protect and aid the townspeople. The preacher suggests burning all the town's belongings to rid it of plague seeds. The town becomes plague-free after. The novel ends unexpectedly with Anna adopting the Bradfords', the town's rich family's, illegitimate child and escaping to an Arab country where she marries a doctor, learns medicine, and helps him treat women.

Discussion: Macrosociology

Shift in Morals

Macrosociology studies large-scale societal interactions and changes. It involves the study of social processes, changes in society within a period of time including conflict, cooperation and competition (Amzat & Maigari, 2021, p.83). Crises, specifically pandemics, push people to steer away from cultural norms, thus affecting their consciousness, their cognitive ability and their mental health. Tolmacheva et. al (2021, p. 6) explain this process as moral panic bearing a negative impact on communities and social processes. This theme of moral panic seems to be consistent with the two novels. In *Year of Wonders*, villagers' morals and social norms are transformed. First, the bubonic plague causes villagers to lose their faith. Throughout the novel, Sunday by Sunday the churchgoers

become fewer (not only because of death), until barely any are attending. As the village has always been religious, first puritan and then Anglican, this shows a deviation from the norm. The proof is when they gather to burn their belongings and sing a religious hymn, their voices are barely audible, symbolizing their fading faith.

The narrative reveals how the characters disregard the community and morals in search for a cause of their crisis. In the beginning, they believe Mompellion, the priest, when he says that God has chosen this community to be tested to prove that they are worthy. After several deaths, they need someone to blame. Tolmacheva et. al claim that isolation leads to sublimation of anger on substitute objects or, in the case of *Year of Wonders*, people. They are already grieving and there doesn't seem to be an end to the plague in sight. As a result, the villagers take out their anger and fear of the unknown on the Gowdies. They grab Mem Gowdie, torture her, then kill her and Anys. This proves that crisis changes the morals of society, as people turn on one another and harm their own community. When the community gathers to punish Aphra, they find out Brand and Robert have humiliated her publicly which has never been a norm in Eyam. Moreover, there is a shift from a religious community to one that believes in spells when it comes to healing. Instead of praying, villagers resort to paying a "ghost" for spells that would protect and heal them from the deadly plague. Multiple families are found with enchanted papers or concoctions made out of urine.

The interactions among the characters change as well. Despite everyone fighting the same epidemic, the novel suggests caution or tension among the villagers. They stop visiting Anna's cottage as it's the birthplace of the plague. Villagers avoid families of those infected. Some even move to a location in Eyam far from the town houses. Even after the plague is gone, villagers struggle to resume "normal" life and still avoid contact with one another.

Similarly, in *The Nightingale* there is a change in societal norms and interactions, yet the citizens still held onto some of their community's societal norms. Despite the crisis in this novel being war, there is no denying the similarities in the reactions of the citizens of France. In chapter eleven of the novel when the women are gathered and learn their husbands have been imprisoned, Rachel says all villagers have sacrificed and compromised their morals during this war. When Vianne goes to town, she points out how people are avoiding one another. They don't chat while waiting in line for food. They're careful not to be seen by the Nazis talking to anyone. The war turns a united village where everyone knows everyone to one controlled by fear and with minimum communication. Like the isolation where people only care about protecting themselves, the war turns people selfish. This can be seen when Vianne and French officers turn on their fellow citizens for their own benefit. Vianne hands the Nazi residing in her home, Captain Beck, a list with the names of all the Jews and communists in Carriveau. The French officers in the Free Zone collect documents and gather Jews, communists, and homosexuals from their homes to take them to concentration camps. While there is little shown of how life in Carriveau was before the war, from the sacrifices of the villagers it can be gathered that they were a close-knit community. Vianne helps protect her fellow villagers' kids when their parents are being deported. She shares her small portions of food with her friend when Rachel gets fired. In addition, it is hinted that all the villagers are aware that Daniel is not Vianne's kid, but Rachel's, a Jew, yet no one reports her to the Nazis. This shows that while the social processes were changed in Carriveau, people were still able to hold onto some of their morals and community. This goes against Tolmacheva et. al who claim that crisis leads to stricter moral judgment and a more conservative social outlook.

The townspeople's purpose in life changed. Both the plague and the war encouraged people to work harder and fight against hardships in order to survive. Due to the excessive anxiety caused by the unknown, the danger, and the fear, the townspeople's performance is affected negatively, and their level of fatigue is higher (Tolmacheva et. al, 2021, p.238). Despite the fatigue and mental exhaustion, the people fought daily. In *Year of Wonders*, the Mempoillions, the Gowdies, Anna and her neighbors work harder to persevere. Mr. Mempoillion carries on writing ceremonies, digging graves and helping the dying. The Gowdies, before they're killed, go home to aid the sick. Anna and Elenor study medicinal herb to find ways to prevent the plague and they guide women through labor. In *The Nightingale*, Vianne works harder to ensure her family has food to eat. She, her sister Isabelle, and other villagers execute schemes for the Resistance instead of submitting to the anxiety and mental exhaustion. Instead of giving up hope, in both novels, the crisis acts as a motivator for the characters to carry on and work harder.

How Crisis Tests Faith

Moreover, in the examined novels, there were changes in the community's spiritual beliefs. In *Year of Wonders*, the villagers refused to believe the Gowdies could be of any help. They refused the family's offers and resorted to physicians who tried to heal with leeches and toads. This is seen when the parents of the second infected child turn away Mem Gowdie and trust a physician they called on – one who didn't even know how to diagnose the patient. However, as the plague deaths continued, their beliefs changed. Tolmacheva et. al refer to this as pandemic psychosis. It's when the worldview of those infected becomes controlled by religious or mythological beliefs and how they resort to these ritual behaviors to calm their anxieties. When fear overtakes Eyam, the villagers go to Mem for aliments. There is a shift from the community attacking Mem Gowdie and calling her a "witch healer" to her becoming their lifeline. This carries on after her death when Anna takes over the labors. She uses a phrase previously recited by the Gowdies, "May the seven directions guide this work. May it be pleasing to my grandmothers, the ancient ones. So, mote it be," (Brooks, 2001, p. 201) before she gets to work. Moreover, the villagers resort to spells sold to them by a ghost to treat sores and protect themselves from the plague. For a religious community, this shows a great shift in their mentality and spirituality.

In *The Nightingale*, on the other hand, the community holds onto its original religious beliefs with Catholicism and Judaism. This can be seen through Vianne who consoles the church when she's in need of help or how she resorts to the church in her time of need. The Jews held on to their beliefs as well. When the Nazis forced the Jews to wear yellow stars, Rachel comments that the whole town already knows their religion and there is no shame in wearing a label to represent their beliefs. This highlights the strong commitment to their faith; despite the social shaming the Nazis try to foster. While there is a shift in beliefs in *Year of Wonders* but not in *The Nightingale*, this macro sociological view of spirituality shows that people need to resort to a spiritual belief to carry on in times of crisis. Schumaker (1992) discusses how fear and anxiety from the unknown act as religious motivators. This is in accordance with the two novels, where both communities had to resort to spirituality for reassurance. The only difference is in *Year of Wonders*, the spirituality is not religion, but witchery. Thus, whether it is religion or witchcraft that people resort to in times of crisis, they need a powerful entity to trust in order to lessen their anxieties.

Othering in Adversity

Another change in social processes is othering. Othering is the alienation of a group of people through labels. It is meant to create a distinction between the us and them in society. These "others" are usually blamed for crises (Banerjee et. al, 2020, p. 103). In *Year of Wonders*, there is the othering of Anna in the beginning and of the Gowdies.

When the villagers find out that George Viccars, the man residing in Anna Firth's cottage, "the house of the black plague," is patient zero, and has brought the plague to their village, people started avoiding Anna and her cottage. They believe the cottage will give them the disease. Later on and following the narrative of Banerjee et. al, where othering is inescapable in a biological disaster, the blame shifts to the Gowdies. The villagers blame the Gowdies of lying with Satan and call that the reason the plague has been brought there. Furthermore, their use of natural herbs that strengthen people and sedate the suffering of those infected alienates them from the rest of society. Since they defy social norms as unmarried woman healers, the village views them negatively. Their differences and the town's anxiety shifts the blame towards them. They therefore suffer, getting marginalized, beaten up and killed. Indeed, during pandemics, "others" are usually low-income women healers or "witch healers" (Banerjee et. al, 2020, p. 103). This point is further proven when at first Anna refuses to learn any of the herbal medicine preparations as she will be called a witch, while Elinor can continue doing so because she has a respectable title. Due to lack of information on the origin of the plague and the laws of medicine, the village being illiterate, there is social prejudice (Banerjee et. al, 2020, p.103).

In *The Nightingale*, Vianne is shunned from her community for living with a Nazi, even though it's not by choice. When she goes into Carriveau, the townspeople look at her judgingly believing she is collaborating with the enemy. When she gathers the women to inform them that their husbands have been captured, are in prison camps, and won't be returning, she gets verbally attacked. This is due to the fear that has a toll on mental health and as a result drags communities into generalizations and othering (Banerjee et. al, 2020, p.105). The townspeople are projecting their emotions towards the war and violence on Vianne. As expected of the plot of a novel in WWII, there is also othering against the Jews. They are fired from their jobs, banned from buying food, have a curfew, and are branded by a yellow star. Furthermore, the Nazis view the French as the other. When Beck cannot find the fallen airman, he gets angry and starts insulting the French. The French are forced to stand in line for hours to gather scraps of food, while the Nazis sit in their offices and in cafes with craters of food around them. Conversely, there is othering toward the Nazis. This is seen when Isabelle and Sophie disrespect Captain Beck and treat him as if he doesn't belong in their home. This is consistent with Banerjee et. al, who believe that in military disputes and in violence, like war, each party blames the other as each group is undesirable to the other.

Power Dynamics

While the beginning showed the traditional power dynamics in the community, there was a shift in the end. In *Year of Wonders*, when the plague hit, the rich were able to escape while their maids were left to fend for themselves. The Bradford family fired all their staff, locked their houses and left. Their maids, who resided with them, were left on the streets. Some of the poor villagers tried to seek refuge at nearby towns but were shunned. Toward the middle of the novel, the traditional power dynamics are broken. The formality between the two classes vanishes. This can be seen through Anna's relationship with Elinor Mompellion. Anna is no longer just a maid; she is a friend and companion. They work together to figure out how to help the town. The shift is especially significant when Elinor shares parts of her personal life with Anna, when she asked Anna to call her by her first name, and when she invites Anna to sit on the pew with her during Sunday service. The shift is also present in the relationship between Anna and Mompellion. Their short-lived union represents the joining of the two classes that will end soon after the pandemic. Barbalet claims that when communities have a common emotion, such as resentment and, here, fear, it unites them regardless of class. This could explain the bond between Anna and the

Mompellions as they work together to overcome the plague and protect their community. Additionally, the shift is seen when Anna is able to talk down to the Bradfords' daughter upon her return. When the daughter hands Anna the reins to her horse, expecting Anna to stable it, Anna hands them back. This proves how when the Bradfords return, they have lost the respect of the priest, and of Anna who no longer holds them to the high standard they used to have or rushes to help them. Furthermore, Elinor and Anna embark on an adventure to try to collect a plate of silver from the mine. Traditionally, this is a man's job, but they fulfill it subverting the power dynamics in their society.

In *The Nightingale*, too, women take on roles usually reserved for men, particularly when Isabelle is helping pilots cross over to Spain. Isabelle steps into the traditional role of a man reassuring the more fragile and vulnerable person, in this case the pilot, Teddy:

"And if a girl can do it, a strapping pilot like you will have no problem at all. Right?"
(p. 338)

Isabelle is the authoritative figure on these rescue missions. This is a switch in power dynamics that not all pilots are comfortable with, and one of them gets killed because of his refusal to listen to a woman. Additionally, women take on resistance roles instead of their expected domestic roles, making them gain more power in society. Isabelle becomes a member of the French Resistance, actively engaging in its activities. The reason behind this shift in power is because women would not be suspected of aiding the Resistance or breaking the rules set by Nazis. The nightingale becomes a name famous among the allies and the Nazis. Henri recruits Isabelle to distribute newspapers supporting the Resistance, because a woman would not be suspected. Barbalet (1992) explains that when the common emotions in such communities, their resentment toward the Nazis, can lead to a switch in leadership positions, the community can benefit from the new power structure to resist injustice.

After Isabelle is arrested and her father takes the fall, she confesses. Yet, the soldier says it is impossible for a woman to be the nightingale. According to Barbalet, the strong resentment is what leads to the urge to fight against inequalities, as in Vianne agitating against the Nazis. She is able to rescue Jewish children while a Nazi lives at her house. She can lie her way out of murdering a Nazi soldier and collaborating with a communist, all because the Nazis believe a woman would not have the guts or power to do anything. Their gender thus provides them with the opportunity to gain power and resist. In the novel, Vianne says, "Men tell stories, I say. It is the truest, simplest answer to his question. 'Women get on with it'" (p. 720). Her words reinforce the idea that in occupied France, the power was in the women's hands while their husbands were prisoners. Though it may be argued that this shift in power dynamics is only there because there weren't any men left, the shift also involves the Nazi soldiers and communists like Henri who were still in Carriveau.

Gossip and Conspiracy

One of the main causes of changes in macrosociology is gossip and conspiracy theories. Gossip and conspiracy theories change the interactions between individuals in Eyam and Carriveau. It also changes the way the community views the targeted individual. As Drazkiewicz and Panczová (2022) mention, when there's crisis, conspiracy theories are a form of reassurance for those affected. In Eyam, due to gaps in knowledge and increases of mistrust in their church, the villagers spread gossip about how the Gowdies are responsible for bringing the plagues to their home. One mother goes into town saying

Mem Gowdie was at her door muttering a curse hours before her son passed. The woman cannot grasp her son's death, so she resorts to creating a conspiracy to deal with the fact instead of facing it. Conspiracy theories are a way for individuals to make sense of events (Drazkiewicz & Panczová, 2020, p. 323).

In addition, there are several conspiracies that spread on how people can heal from the plague. These theories spread as individuals are threatened and feel out of control (Drazkiewicz & Panczová, 2020, p. 321). One is the herbal knowledge of the Gowdies which quickly gets shut down after they are unable to cure anyone. Then there are the conspiracies from nearby universities, like the concoctions and dead toads they send Elinor to treat Anna's eldest son. There are conspiracies on how the plague infects individuals. The theories range from punishments from God to close contact, to witchcraft, and the devil. The gossip acts as a way to bring the individuals closer together to overcome the plague; at the same time, it creates a rift between the villagers, the Gowdies and the Mompellions. According to Paine (1967), gossip is a way for communities to bond over shared morals and values. In other words, gossip portrays the community's values.

Moving on to *The Nightingale*, Vianne is isolated from the rest of the townspeople who spread rumors that she is dating Captain Beck, the Nazi residing in her home. Though Vianne is only trying to help her community when she visits Beck's office, and when she gathers little information from him, Vianne still gets odd looks from her neighbors and is treated bitterly. This is because the townspeople have little information on the situation, and they need someone to blame for the occupation and hardships. The townspeople could also be attacking Vianne as a way to distinguish themselves from her; they see her as a conspirator in the Nazi propaganda and want to prove their morals are better than hers. After all, gossip is a way to claim moral recognition (Paine, 1967). The conspiracy theories and gossip create a way to ensure that the townspeople are still on the same wavelength in times of crisis. It is almost as if it's a way for them to hold on to who they were and what their morals were before the war and plague. In both studied novels, therefore, there is a similar change in macrosociology, minus the aspect of religion. Despite the different crises and times, the change in social processes, communities and interactions is almost identical.

Discussion: Microsociology

"In love we find out who we want to be; in war we find out who we are," (Hannah, 2015, p. 8). Microsociology zooms in on individuals to study how they behave in their everyday lives and in different settings. With the hardships and grief there is bound to be self-discovery and change. Starting with Brooks's *Year of Wonders*, the epidemic helps Anna discover who she is and what she's capable of. The novel starts after the plague has left the village. Anna is mentally exhausted and too tired to carry on working for another winter season where there won't be enough food or warmth. As the novel carries on, Anna is portrayed as a brave woman who constantly overcomes her moments of weakness. She seems to forget about her fatigue when she finds a purpose. It's as if Anna having something to work on, or with, helps her forget her struggles. After she finds a child in need of a home, Anna forgets her exhaustion, is quick to save the child's life, and leaves her village to protect her.

During the peak of infections, Anna longs to escape to nearby towns now that it's become forbidden. It seems she is about to give up: "The Plague already had taken from me the greatest part of what I had to lose; what was left of my life seemed to me, at that moment, barely worth the effort of saving" (p. 191). She resorts to stealing and using poppy seeds to

deal with her pain. However, when she realizes that there is no one left to take care of the villagers, she steps up. She burns the last of the seeds and throws herself into studying the Gowdies' journals to try to analyze how the plague can be stopped or cured. With Elinor's help, Anna puts behind her the fear of contracting the plague and goes house to house giving people concoctions that will strengthen their immunity or help with the bubonic sores. They also tend to the elderly and children that have no one left and take care of the Gowdies' garden.

At the beginning, Anna is a timid woman, lonely and depressed with no purpose to keep her going. The plague helps her find out she is strong enough to take care of a village and smart enough to protect it. It gives her a purpose and helps her discover her love for medicine. When she escapes Eyam, she lives with a doctor who teaches her and hires her to treat female patients. Anna gradually finds her strength and bravery. When she works as a servant at the Bradfords she wouldn't look them in the face or converse freely with any of the dinner guests. Later, she talks to down a Bradford and is not reserved with her conversations with the Mompellions. While the plague is tough on Anna, it helps nourish and uncover her true personality. Otherwise, she might have still been a young illiterate mother filled with fear of people of a higher social class.

As for Hannah's *The Nightingale*, the war changes Vianne for the better and helps Isabelle uncover a part of her personality she is unaware of. Before the Nazis reach Carriveau, Vianne refuses to believe they would enter France. She relies on Antoine for everything that's not part of her domestic duties. She has never been on her own before, unlike Isabelle. For a part of the occupation, Vianne believes herself incapable of handling the family finances and protecting her daughter. When she realizes no one is coming to save her and that Antoine is imprisoned, she discovers her full potential and proves herself wrong. She quickly makes a list of chores that ensures there will be food on the table throughout the seasons and clothes for her children. She stops trying to become invisible in the presence of Nazis to not get in trouble. She realizes that staying silent is not helping anyone and that she needs to set a better example for Sophie, her daughter. She walks into the Nazi's office and confronts Captain Beck despite the danger she is putting herself in.

When the Nazis invade the school to gather Jewish employees, Vianne is quick to protect her students proving that she will shield the children; endangering herself to ensure their safety is something she has not believed she is capable of. She writes a letter to her husband asking for help as there is no money left, but then she stops herself and realizes that she can make ends meet on her own. She sells her family heirlooms and jewels to feed her children. This shows she is starting to believe in herself and find out who she is outside of her relationship with her childhood sweetheart. She protects her friend Rachel when the Nazis start gathering the Jewish. Vianne guides Rachel and her children under cover of night to the borders so they won't be captured. She is quick on her feet when Sophie gets shot. She moves the others to safety and helps Rachel navigate her loss before taking them back to her house and hiding them – a solution she arrives at on her own.

Although Vianne claims she is not as brave as her sister, that she can never defy authority or resist the occupation, when it comes to protecting her family, she does not hesitate to risk her life for them. When Isabelle gets caught hiding an English pilot, Vianne kills Captain Beck to protect her sister. When questioned about it, she lies, claiming she doesn't know anything about Beck's whereabouts. When Rachel is taken, Vianne keeps her son and raises him as her own, in spite of the Nazis threatening to kill anyone hiding or aiding a Jew. She rescues thirteen Jewish children and hides them while a vicious Nazi

resides with her: "We have to try to save him, or we are as bad as they are" (p. 537), she tells her daughter. She forges government documents and creates a new identity for each child. When Von Richter threatens her kids, she lets him rape her repeatedly to keep them safe. Finally, she lets Ari/Daniel go be with relatives after the war is over. Though she is reluctant to let go, she does what is best for him. These events show Vianne that she is stronger than she believes and that regardless her doubt, fear, and inexperience, she is more than apt at protecting her children and fighting for what she believes in. She is capable of surviving on her own.

Vianne's actions contradict Banerjee et. al's claims that anxiety decreases rationality as Vianne makes thoughtful decisions to fulfill what she wishes. As for Isabelle, war makes her realize she is not the fearless and determined person she thought she is. When Anouk tells her she must last two days if she gets caught and is being questioned, Isabelle is quick to point out how easy that would be. This shows that her fearlessness stems from a place of innocence. After she joins the resistance in Paris, she becomes paranoid that she is being followed. When she is being tortured for answers, she becomes fearful of death. Finally, when she is in the prison camp, she almost gives up. She used to motivate men to cross mountains, but in the camp, she needs Madame Babineau to remind her to keep fighting and to help her move forward. This shows that the war makes Isabelle lose her belief in her invincibility and leads to her discover her fears and weaknesses.

Captain Beck is changed by the war as well. After the horrors he witnesses the Nazis commit, he confides in Vianne telling her he is too ashamed to go home because of what his country has done. When he joins the war, he does not realize this is what his country has in mind. He no longer wishes to stay away from his family and achieve nothing but violence and shame. He even rebels against the war crimes of his army and gifts Vianne fake ID papers to protect Ari. In short, this shows that the war helps him conclude that family is more important than violence and that the values he wants to fight for do not align with the values the Nazis are fighting for.

Religion on a Personal Level

As for religion in crisis, both Anna and Vianne gradually lose their faith as the war and the plague continue. Anna still attends church, but from her inner monologue it can be concluded that she attends for the friendship she has formed with the Mompellions and for the community. Anna loses both her sons, her future husband, and her best friend to the plague. While her son lies dying in her living room, she questions God for the first time. She wonders how He can ask her to love Him more than she loves her own children and concludes that it's impossible. When Maggie is dying next to her, she questions God's motives in creating humans only for them to suffer and die early. She questions God's choices in killing the good while the bad still roam around:

Why did He raise us up out of the clay, to acquire good and expedient skills, and then send us back so soon to be dust when we yet had useful years before us? And why should this good woman lie here, in such extremity, when a man like my father lived to waste his reason in drunkenness? (p. 219)

The plague leads Anna to rethink what she has been taught to believe in, instead of following it blindly. The disease and deaths force her into discovering her beliefs or what she doesn't believe in. She gets the chance to distance herself from the religious community and question real-life events and suffering, not just read about them on paper. Her confirmation of her new lack of faith is evident when she "looks at her calculating,

empty face [and] tries to pray; but she realizes she's forgotten all the psalms and prayers she once knew by heart" (p. 290).

The same transformation happens with Vianne. At the beginning of the war, she goes to church for guidance after townspeople get fired from the list she wrote for Captain Beck containing the names of all the Jews in her town. One of the many factors for her loss of faith is her grief. She has lost all but two of her family members due to the war. She has seen her dad's dead body and her sister's dying one. She watches as the boy she has raised gets taken away. Sophie's best friend dies in Vianne's arms. She finds out Rachel and her husband were killed in concentration camps. When she reminisces about her past, she claims that there is no heaven to which her family members have gone. She lets go of the ideology that gives her comfort and shelters her from the truth. When she is burying Sarah, a child her kid's age, she feels isolated from the teachings of fairness and life she hears in the church. Vianne asks, "What kind of benevolent God would allow such a thing?" (p. 436). As time goes on, Vianne mentions how it is hard to find comfort in religion when you are on the verge of death. She wonders how she is expected to recall her faith when she has nothing left in her:

This was not the sermon Vianne wanted to hear. She had come to church—braved the cold—to be comforted by Father's sermon on this Sunday, to be inspired by words like "honor" and "duty" and "loyalty." But today, those ideals felt far, far away. How could you hold on to ideals when you were sick and cold and starving? (p. 377)

Crises are a test of character. It does not matter if it's a war or a pathogen. The crisis strips away the person's superego and lets them act out their natural instincts, revealing who they truly are. In the beginning, the characters, as we have seen, hold onto their faith as it is the only given in a world of unknown, but once accustomed to the new way of living, religion no longer lessens their anxiety. On the contrary, it becomes an ideology they can't get behind as it contradicts their realities. It becomes hard to believe the higher power, that they have been taught loves them, allows humanity to suffer and die. The war and the plague help Vianne and Anna uncover parts of themselves they did not know existed. Hardship leads them to figure out who they truly are; it makes them question ideologies they have been raised on in the community. Crisis doesn't always shape one to be a better person, but it does unveil their true colors.

Role of Nature

A consistent theme in the two novels is nature. As Kellert (2011, p. 4) reveals in his discussion of the biophilia theory, "The nonhuman environment, far from being of little or no account to human [health and] personality development, constitutes one of the most basically important ingredients of human existence." Vianne, Isabelle, and Anna go back to nature to understand their crises and deal with their grief. Nature helps with problem-solving, reflection, and emotions. In addition, nature gives a sense of security (Kellert, p.7). Vianne and Anna use nature to hold on to memories. Anna remembers the plague from the smell of rotten apples. When the plague overtakes the town and most farmers die, they can't harvest the apples, so they rot and fall to the ground. Anna would smell this on her way to the Mompellion's house. As for Vianne, she carries the memory of her husband to the scent of jasmines, claiming she will remember their goodbye every time she smells it as it's the scent that was there while he hugged her.

Kellert's biophilia theory claims that nature is linked to memory. To understand the plague, Anna links it to nature. She says the plague is a work of nature and not of God and

compares it to stubbing one's toe on a stone, a painful accident. Moreover, she compares the plague to unwanted tare the farmer wants to rid his soil of. By this she means they need to find the origin of the plague and get it out of town. When Isabelle first hears warplanes, to familiarize herself with them she links them to the buzzing of bees. This, according to Kellert, is an inherent inclination that has existed in humans for the longest time. Isabelle links the new sound to one she's familiar with to avoid panic. Only when she sees the planes, does she realize the truth and experience fear.

Anna, Vianne and Sophie acknowledge their emotions through nature. To show the effects of the plague on the community, Anna shows how previously frequented roads are now overgrown with grass. This is a symbolism to how the community was forced to surrender to nature, the plague. She also links remembrance to streams, how the reflection is there muddled and then gone in an instance. When she visits her sons' graves, it is the scent of the wet stone she goes to to calm her raging emotions. Moreover, nature is there in what she calls the best moment of her life. Her son climbs up the stairs and showers her with rose petals. Nature is there when she takes her kids to play in the river before they die. Furthermore, nature portrays Anna's emotions in a concrete manner. When she stands at the edge of town isolated from a world she never gets to discover, her children dead, her emotions are shown through the trees the storm has stripped from leaves leaving them bare.

The most noticeable way Vianne goes to nature to deal with her grief is the apple tree in her yard. She hangs a thread for every member of her family that is gone. Whenever she wishes to remember one of them or feel connected to Antoine, she goes and stands under the tree. At the end of the novel, the tree, unlike all apple trees in town, is dead with its fruit rotten. This is a symbol of the lost lives and loss of innocence during war. Moreover, Vianne uses nature to deal with her emotions and comprehend death. She is worried about Isabelle and Antoine, so she goes to the garden. Knowing that contact with nature is believed to enhance mental wellbeing (Kellert, 2011, p. 4), when Vianne wants to explain death to her daughter, she takes her to the apple tree of remembrance. She explains how she has hung the thread to remember her husband and encourages her daughter to do the same to remember her best friend. Moreover, Sophie puts on a daisy crown her dad made her when she says goodbye and refuses to take it off. The crown rots, yet it still lies next to her. This is a symbol of Sophie's mental state after her dad has left to fight the war and of her holding on to his memory through nature. This proves that nature is a medium for the characters to connect with those that are not beside them.

In short, in times of crisis people go back to what they know for comfort, to deal with their emotions, and to gain a sense of control in their times of uncertainty. People have always been surrounded by nature; it would make sense that they resort to it in dire times.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to prove that no matter the crisis or setting, hardship affects individuals and societies similarly. People going through crisis react and cope in the same manner. The plague and the war in the examined novels are more than a century apart, yet the changes in micro and macro sociology remain identical. There is a decrease in religiousness in both novels. In Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*, this decrease is on a more personal than communal level, as compared to Geraldine Brooks's *Year of Wonders*. There is also a shift in power dynamics. The plague erases the gap between social classes while the war gives women power to resist and rebel against the Nazis. There is a shift, too, in the community's morals as people blame and harm each other. Whether in

Carriveau or Eyam, people resort to gossiping and conspiracy theories to make sense of the situations they are in, from witchcraft to political and love affairs. Moreover, characters are able to find their true nature as the crisis helps them discover their strengths and capabilities.

In both novels, the reactions on a micro-sociological level are the same when it comes to religion. Vianne and Anna lose their faith; to survive, they fight through their exhaustion to ensure the survival of their communities or loved ones. As a coping mechanism, characters from both novels invoke nature to understand their crisis, their loss, to hold on to memories and feel in control. However, this study has certain limitations. Since the novels are works of fiction, they offer a limited perspective of reality. Additionally, they focus on certain topics more than others, with minimal focus on religion in the community of Carriveau, for instance. Finally, since both novels are set in European countries, it is difficult to generalize the findings. While further research is needed, this study contributes to further understanding the sociological transformations of individuals and communities during crisis.

Reine Fawaz
English Literature Graduate, Lebanese American University (LAU)
rein.fawaz@lau.edu

REFERENCES

- Ali, R. M., & Yunita, A. (2020). Woman's struggle to fight against Nazis as reflected in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*: A feminist approach. *Ahmad Dahlan Journal of English Studies*, 7(2), 55–67. <https://doi.org/10.26555/adjes.v7i2.15659>
- Amzat, J., & Maigari, A. M. (2021). Macro and micro perspectives in sociology. Introduction to African culture, context and complexity, 7(8) 82-91.
- Barbalet, J. M. (1992). A macro sociology of emotion: Class resentment. *Sociological Theory*, 10(2), 150–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/201956>
- Banerjee, D., Kallivayalil, R. A., & Sathyanarayana Rao, T. S. (2020). The “othering” in pandemics: Prejudice and orientalism in COVID-19. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 36(1), S102–S106. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijsp.ijsp_261_20
- Biswas, I. (2020). “When spotted deaths ran arm’d through every street”: Women-healers and the Great Plague in Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(5), 1–6. 10.21659/rupkatha.v12n5.rioc1s26n4
- Dražkiewicz, E., & Panczová, Z. (2022). Conspiracy theories, rumours and gossip at the time of crisis: COVID-19 emergency in Eastern Europe and Africa. *Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology*, 70(3), 320–327. <https://doi.org/10.31577/SN.2022.3.27>
- Hikmah, A., Ariani, S., & Rahayu, F. (2023). Historical events of Second World War in France in Hannah's *The Nightingale* novel: Historicism approach. *Ilmu Budaya: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, dan Budaya*, 7(2), 447–458. 10.30872/ijbssb.v7i2.7601
- Kellert, S. R., Heerwagen, J., & Mador, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Biophilic design: The theory, science and practice of bringing buildings to life*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Paine, R. (1967). What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis. *Man*, 2(2), 278–285. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2799493>
- Putra, A. S. M. (2022). Women's resistance during Nazi occupation in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*. *Lingua Litera: Journal of English Linguistics and Literature*, 7(1), 35–43. 10.55345/stba1.v7i1.119

- Schumaker, J. F. (Ed.).** (1992). *Religion and mental health*. Oxford University Press.
- Tolmacheva, S., Alifanov, K., Shalamov, V., Yurieva, O., & Kulkova, E.** (2021). The impact of the pandemic on moral panics in society. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 5(3), 232–243. <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v5n3.1485>