

# Camus and freud essay



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Albert Camus, in his novel *The Plague*, presents many arguments about how he foresees a positive change in the world through manipulation of behavior on the personal level. Sigmund Freud, in his works, specifically *Civilization and Its Discontents*, presents his view of human nature and what is innately problematic about it. Both Freud and Camus agree that human behavior is the result of outside factors that severely hinder the concept of free will. Camus believes that humans, in the correct environment, can live happily, while Freud understands that humans are destined to live in "some degree of anguish or discontent.

"Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* tells the story of a town gripped by a deadly disease, and of how the inhabitants strive to overcome it. Many consider the inhabitants' fight against the plague to be an allegory to the German Occupation of France. However, Albert Camus felt that life was a series of contradictions. He felt that humans sought to explain the world in "human terms." Camus says, "the world is thus not explicable." Because of this condition, he referred to human life as "absurd." This absurdity amounts to an emptiness in our lives and makes our very existence meaningless.

Camus also believed we could find meaning through "purpose action," which means "revolting" against injustices and fighting the "plagues that enslave man." This belief runs throughout the novel; and the main characters all represent this belief. When Camus states that there are more admirable things than despicable things about men, he is referring to their ability to put aside selfish intentions to help their fellow man. The

beginning of the novel displays a society where the inhabitants “ to spend those days of fire indoors, behind closed shutters. “

The people much like the shutters are closed off from their neighbors, and usually devote themselves to “ cultivating habits” . For the most part everyone in Oran is an individual; they do not care their fellow man.

However, the plague changes all of this. When the plague strikes, at first each person refuses to accept the inhumanity of the situation, and try to continue life as they always have, in their selfish pursuits. However, as the death toll rises the people realize that they cannot fight the plague on their own, and that they must unit together and do so something to fight the plague.

Of all the characters in The Plague, Tarrou most conveys Camus' ideals and beliefs that we must “ revolt” against injustice. Camus, through Tarrou, conveys his belief that man must do good to bring out that “ innate goodness” within him. Tarrou explains, “ All I maintain is that there are on this earth pestilence and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilence”. Camus believes there there is good inside every man but it takes an external force of nature to bring that characteristic to the forefront. Freud has a different concept of human existence.

He says that people are “ formed” out of experiences and pre-existent conditions. However, Freud believes that the biggest factor in shaping human behavior is much more personal and internal. Since everyone experiences things differently, he claims, it is impossible to shape everyone

so that some Utopian society will form. Freud recognizes on one level that there is an innate conflict between the individual and society. So even at the first level, there is a conflict which will hinder happiness. Freud states that the norms of society are much too rigorous for the common person because they are in conflict with the inner desires of the psyche.

Keep in mind, this has nothing to do with each individual's "roots," but it states that, upon entering the world, each human is doomed to conflict with societal standards. From day one also, each individual feels pressure from every social direction. His parents influence him by their rearing methods and their requirements of him. As he begins to develop, his mind does as well, and any negative experience manifests some degree of conflict between the three parts of the mind. Basically, Freud has such a harsh view of reality because he believes there are so many ways in which the mind is attacked: social, parental, self-inflicted.

One might have no problem dealing with the pressure from society, yet may for example, feel guilty about one thing or another. Freud would say that this would create some sort of conflict in the mind, one which is inevitable and through no amount of conditioning is prohibitive. Also, since the three parts of the mind (id, ego, and superego) are constantly tearing at one another. The ego has to balance the desires of the id with the standards of the superego while accepting the outside reality. If any problem occurs and the balance is thrown off, suffering will result.

One main idea presented in both writings by Camus and Freud is the religious feeling one gets when they are in an environment that has no

limitations. The oceanic feeling as described by Freud " is a feeling of something limitless, unbounded...the source of religious energy...one may rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this feeling alone". In Camus' *The Plague*, Tarrou's goal in life is not only to end suffering, but also to become a saint. However, ironically, Tarrou is an atheist, " can one be a saint without God...that's the problem, in fact the only problem. " The question is, therefore: What is it that makes a saint?

First, a saint is a holy man who has attained peace in heaven and second a saint becomes an example to everyone of the goodness that is possible for a man to accomplish. Through Tarrou, Camus thus presents his belief: A man gives himself and his life meaning through the good deeds which he performs for the welfare of others. No man can attain peace in any other way. Good actions must replace the conscious and unconscious indifference, which plagues mankind. This feeling or emotion that Freud describes seems very similar if not identical the feeling Tarrou experienced when he was helping those who were ill.

This religious theme is talked about throughout both books in different forms. Both Freud and Camus find problems with the current social situation. Freud says that, for the most part, we cannot change the inner mechanisms of the mind, while Camus says that any type of conditioning, especially those from outside sources are possible. There are many similarities and differences between the theories of Sigmund Freud and Albert Camus. Maybe through these theories, we can learn to form some sort of resolution.

References: Camus, A. *The Plague*. New York: Random House  
Freud, S. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.