

# Liberty and the state

Literature



Liberty and the A Meditation of Camus's The Plague In the streets of Oran, part of the French colony of Algeria, a dead rat leads to thousands of rodents rotting in the streets. Despite the methodical cremation of the corpses, this disease jumps the species barrier and claims its first human victim.

Unfortunately, as more clusters of human illness emerge, only two men understand the calamity of what is happening. Our narrator, Dr. Rieux, and his colleague Castel, fight for some official action, but it is only when the reality of the plague is absolutely impossible to ignore does the city go into quarantine.

Blinded by individual circumstances, the people of Oran refuse to see the commonality of their situations, preferring to view their misery as unique. As preachers rage, smugglers profit and some seek to illicitly flee (despite the risk of introducing this death elsewhere); Dr. Rieux and a few others dedicate themselves to the majority and assist the victims, answering to social responsibility instead of selfishness. Eventually other citizens also manage to look past their own personal misfortunes as well.

Throughout all this, the disease kills indiscriminately. Good and bad, the young and old, rich and poor are all struck down, and it is difficult to continue believing in a higher power as children suffer agonizing deaths.

Unfortunately, the quarantine is lifted too late for Dr. Rieux, for his own wife already died of an extended illness. As the memories of this terrible ordeal fade away, the doctor knows the spores carrying the disease are only dormant, ready to explode into life again. Yet the city continues.

For Camus, every person had the right to live, and his idea of justice forbade him from supporting the French colonial policy. The bureaucratic nightmare he portrays so vividly as Dr. Rieux argued and begged the colonial

authorities to accept that a disaster was brewing is a portrait of an overblown and unresponsive government. Their inability to take action earlier not only threatened other towns as free travel was still permitted, but the delay made the ten months of quarantine even worse for its own citizens.

Yet there is something clearly ominous about the blockade of an entire city, with French soldiers guarding the outside of the city gates as the chortling smoke from the crematorium hovers in the air of Oran. While any sort of routine is made impossible by the unfathomable amount of deaths, these soldiers do continue in their way, answering to French authorities, keeping the people in. Over the ten months many people catch the disease, people that would not have caught it had they been allowed to leave. It is almost as though these soldiers are somehow using the threat of force to guarantee the vicious demise of many.

Just as society has many layers, so does this allegory. Although the public health risk had to be answered, the clamor to act was only truly made by those who stayed in Oran and accepted their social responsibility. As hundreds die each week, Dr. Rieux and Jean Tarrou tirelessly diagnose and assist the afflicted, despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation. Perhaps this is the true justice, acting for the benefit of others as opposed to standing at a gate with a gun.

There is freedom to act and freedom from danger—yet even when the authorities step in for the overall protection of Algiers, they condemn countless men, women and children to their death. However, even in the bowels of a disease-ridden hell, those with the will to contribute to the

ultimate right of each person, to live, still act. So there is some greater freedom available, even within the restrictive confines of the State.