

The plague as double allegory



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In *The Plague*, Albert Camus writes about a plague that strikes the Algerian town of Oran around 1940 and devastates the residents who did not expect a plague. This work of fiction takes on meaning beyond the plague itself by looking at how the characters and the society respond to the plague. The plague and society's subsequent response can both be paralleled to actual historical events that occurred immediately before *The Plague's* 1947 publication. However, Camus' *The Plague*, while ostensibly allegorical of the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, is also an allegory of human solidarity against social calamities.

The Plague can be regarded as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of Paris because of the circumstances regarding its publication. Camus published *The Plague* in 1947, two years after the end of World War II. He began writing *The Plague* while he was in Paris during the Nazi occupation of France. In fact, Camus arrived in Paris shortly before the Nazis did (about two months earlier, in fact). Once the Nazis had invaded, he joined the French Resistance against Nazi occupation and became the editor of a pro-liberation, leftist newspaper. He kept copious notes on the situation in France and began writing *The Plague* during that time. It is only natural that *The Plague* would be shaped by Camus's experiences during the Nazi occupation of France.

The Plague's plot line reflects the situation during the Nazi occupation. The original French title was *La Peste*; the word "peste" has two meanings in French, "plague" and "pest" ("Peste"). If we were to take *The Plague* as allegorical of the Nazi invasion, the plague is the epidemic and the pests are the rats. The rats represent the Nazis and the plague represents the destruction caused by the Nazis to Camus' new home. The Nazis had cut off

Paris from the outside world and trapped the entire city within itself. That led to Camus first contemplating *Les Prisonniers* or, *The Prisoner* as the title for this novel. In fact, he wrote “ Don’t put ‘ the plague’ in the title. But something like ‘ *The Prisoners*’” (Camus, Notebook IV 28). The people of this fictional world are trapped, with no possibility of escape.

The idea of France at that time being a prison fits well. The setting of *The Plague* is Oran, which is a real town in Algeria, Camus’ native country. Camus was familiar with Oran, having taught there for three months in 1940.

However, it fell to the Nazis later that year (after Camus left). The Nazis occupied it for two years before the Allies launched Operation Torch in 1942 and removed the Nazis from Northern Africa, including from Oran.

Meanwhile, Camus was in Paris, involved in the underground resistance to the Nazis. He had been exiled from his original home and he was a prisoner in his new home. Camus reflected this in Rambert’s attempting to leave town legally and his receiving of a mocking reaction: “ But the post-office officials had vetoed this [sending a letter], his colleagues of the local press said they could do nothing for him, and a clerk in the Prefect’s office had laughed in his face” (Camus, *The Plague* 84). Camus was unable to leave Paris and Rambert was unable to leave Oran.

In *The Plague*, the residents of Oran at first completely deny that they have been invaded and occupied. . After all, it has been many years since an actual plague had struck Europe and in that modern age, with antibiotics and advanced medicine, everyone was confident that any threat would quickly be mitigated: “...he said that he knew quite well that it was plague...he also knew that, were this to be officially admitted, the authorities would be

compelled to take very drastic steps. This was, of course, the explanation of his colleagues' reluctance to face the facts and, if it would ease their minds, he was quite prepared to say it wasn't plague" (Camus, *The Plague* 48). In real life, France had defeated the Germans in WW1 only 20 years before and force upon them a crippling treaty. The French, in their hubris, did not imagine that Germany would be able to defeat and occupy France. However, the Nazis managed to take Paris in three short weeks in 1940. In the novel, the plague struck Oran much quicker, but the people still found it hard to believe.

Once the Nazis took France, many French people felt that they should accept the inevitable Nazi domination of Europe (including French soil). In the novel, Father Paneloux and his followers embody those views, favoring praying for God's forgiveness over actual action against the plague. He claims that the plague came because the town collectively turned its back to God: " For a long while God gazed down on this town with eyes of compassion; but He grew weary of waiting, His eternal hope was too long deferred, and now He has turned His face away from us. And so, God's light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of this plague" (Camus, *The Plague* 96).

Father Paneloux takes advantage of the plague to boost the town's participation in church. A small but noticeable minority of people accept his view and decide to simply pray and beg for forgiveness from God instead of taking an active stance against the problem.

In contrast to the passivity and selfishness of many characters, Dr. Rieux takes an active stand against the plague. The kind hearted doctor, along with the health teams, represents the French Resistance, and by extension,

Camus himself. Rieux fights against the plague and encourages others to do so as well. Even more telling, it is revealed at the end that he has been the narrator throughout, writing the history of his town's eventual victorious struggle with the plague. Similarly, Camus, the francophone litterateur, wrote the history of France's struggle against and victory over the Nazis when they occupied and terrorized France.

However, Camus did not acknowledge that he was writing the history of France under Nazi occupation. In his Notebooks, Camus mentions *The Plague* several times but he never acknowledges it as a political allegory. This is not as significant as it might seem though because he was in Nazi controlled territory. The Gestapo (Nazi police infamous for sending dissenters to concentration camps) inspired fear and it is likely that Albert Camus did not want to put any potentially rebellious thoughts on paper. He made his point in a much more subtle way: he wrote a novel that is allegorical of the Nazis but never directly mentions them, thus protecting himself from any retribution from the Nazis. They never would have been able to prove *The Plague* was actually about their occupation.

Instead, Camus includes an apolitical message in the story. In Notebook IV, written in October of 1942, Camus states " *The Plague* has a social meaning and metaphysical meaning. It's exactly the same" (Camus, Notebook IV 36). *The Plague* is littered with a cast of characters displaying the full range of different individual human reactions to a calamity. They make difficult decisions under duress. Some like Rambert and Tarrou try to get out of Oran, but ultimately they join together in the group response to the calamity. They are able to get rid of the plague because they join forces.

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Thus, *The Plague* can also be seen as transcending the Nazi invasion and occupation of France and representing the human response to calamities in general. This makes it a “double allegory” comprising both the political allegory and a moral allegory. The political allegory is when parallels can be drawn to the Nazi occupation of France. The moral allegory is the overall human solidarity which defeats the plague.

Camus achieves this moral allegory by keeping the language as general as possible, as well as by making the calamity a fairly generic one. The plague is simply the backdrop for the fascinating human developments that we see in the story. The Nazi presence in France is never directly mentioned, but it is fascinating to readers familiar with the course of World War II. Camus effectively utilizes the plague to give a political and moral lesson that transcends time.