Human Existentialism: The Plague By Albert Camus

Human existence is created from thoughts, experiences, and actions. The Plague, by Albert Camus, describes a plague outbreak in Oran, an Algerian city, that causes the community to be quarantined and find a solution. When a mild hysteria grips the population, the newspapers begin clamoring for action. The authorities finally arranged for the daily collection and cremation of the rats that carry the plague. Soon thereafter, M. Michel, the concierge for the building where Dr. Rieux works, dies after falling ill with a strange fever. When a cluster of similar cases appears, Dr. Rieux's colleague, Castel, becomes certain that the illness is the bubonic plague. He and Dr. Rieux are forced to confront the indifference and denial of the authorities and other doctors in their attempts to urge quick, decisive action. Only after it becomes impossible to deny that a serious epidemic is ravaging Oran, do the authorities enact strict sanitation measures, placing the whole city under quarantine. The public reacts to their sudden imprisonment with intense longing for absent loved ones. They indulge in selfish personal distress, convinced that their pain is unique in comparison to common suffering. Father Paneloux delivers a stern sermon, declaring that the plague is God's punishment for Oran's sins. Raymond Rambert endeavors to escape Oran to rejoin his wife in Paris, but the city's bureaucrats refuse to let him leave. He tries to escape by illegal means with the help of Cottard's criminal associates. Meanwhile, Rieux, Tarrou, and Grand doggedly battle the death and suffering wrought by the plague. Rambert finalizes his escape plan, but, after Tarrou tells him that Rieux is likewise separated from his wife, Rambert is ashamed to flee. He chooses to stay behind and help fight the epidemic. Cottard committed a crime (which he does not name) in the past, so he has lived in constant fear of arrest and punishment. He greets the plague epidemic with open arms because he no longer feels alone in his fearful suffering. He accumulates a great deal of wealth as a smuggler during the epidemic. Albert Camus uses the character’s experiences in The Plague to show the relationship between personal suffering, human existence, and collusion versus seclusion.

Albert Camus wrote The Plague through a philosophical lens because he was obsessed with the existentialist idea of individual people having the ability to form their own essence. Essence is someone's predetermined fate that cannot be changed; someone’s essence is ascertained at birth. Existentialism states that the essence is determined through personal choices throughout life and is not determined at birth. Camus was also involved in the philosophical idea of “The Absurd”, which is the idea that human beings live in a pointless, meaningless, and purposeless universe and cannot find a way to find meaning. Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913, in Mondovi, Algeria. His father was killed in World War I at the battle of Marne. Although his family was impoverished, Camus went on to attend university in Algiers. He paid the expenses of his education with various odd jobs until a severe attack of tuberculosis forced him to drop out. His writing is greatly influenced by the poverty and illness of his youth. He also wrote extensively about the conditions of poverty in Algeria while working as a journalist for an anti-colonialist newspaper.

During World War II, Camus went to Paris and joined the anti-Nazi resistance movement. It was in wartime Paris that Camus developed his philosophy of the absurd--the assertion that life ultimately has no rational meaning. While the philosophy of Camus' fiction often tends to imply that no moral order actually has a rational basis, Camus himself did not act with moral

indifference. Rather, since Camus does not draw a direct correlation between the lack of hope and despair, his philosophy can best be characterized as a form of optimism without hope. The absurd hero is a hero because he achieves the ultimate rebellion--that which resists the illusion of a rational order while also resisting despair. Throughout his life, Camus was deeply concerned with the problem of human suffering in an indifferent world. In The Plague, Camus addresses the collective response to catastrophe when a large city in Algeria is isolated due to an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Although the effort to alleviate and prevent human suffering seems to make little or no difference in the ravages of the plague, Camus asserts that perseverance in the face of tragedy is a noble struggle even if it ultimately fails to make an appreciable difference. Such catastrophes test the tension between individual self-interest and social responsibility. Camus' philosophy borrows a lot of ideas from the Existentialist movement. Similar to the Existentialists, Camus asserted that there is no intrinsic rational or moral meaning in human existence. However, his body of work suggests that within every human being there is an innate capacity for good, although many people never fully realize their potential. Camus often challenged the validity of accepted moral paradigms, but he did not view the human character as a moral vacuum. Camus won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1957. On January 4, 1960, he was killed in an automobile accident in Southern France.

Albert Camus uses the plague to symbolize a difficult “wall” in life that has to be overcome. With this idea, he then writes different perspectives of each character, a criminal, a doctor, an elder servant, a priest, and a journalist, all relayed through the narrator, who, at the end, is revealed to be Rieux. Each character has their own opinions and feelings on the plague; therefore, they have their morals tested and respond differently. The priest and doctor represent hope because they have meaning to their lives and are driven to help others, to find a cure for the epidemic, but the difference between the doctor and priest is the priest believes the plague is a test of faith in God. The criminal represents self-preservation because, once the outbreak occurs, he decides to risk everyone’s safety and escape the quarantine zone and save himself from the plague. The journalist represents curiosity and suffering.

The setting is the 1940s in French-occupied Algerian. Dr. Bernard Rieux is the first to intuit that things are not right with the city when he notices a sudden spike in the number of dead rats around town. Before too long thousands are making their way to the streets to die. The sight of the Oran littered with the carcasses of rats stimulates panic among the citizens and forces the government to order a special force tasked with cremating the rodents. As the rat carcass problem begins to be contained, Dr. Rieux is called to treat the concierge where he works who complains of an unusual fever. Not long after the concierge succumbs to the ravages of fever, doctors all over town are flooded with patients experiencing similar symptoms. Rieux and an elderly colleague named Castel suspect the Oran has become the victim of an outbreak of bubonic plague. Requests to the government to initiate a strategy before an epidemic gets out of control are ignored and only after the death toll skyrockets are leaders finally incapable of denying the seriousness of the situation. By the time they finally respond to the gravity of the outbreak, the only choice is absolute quarantine of the city. Oran essentially becomes cut off and isolated from the rest of the world. The reaction of the residents of Oran vary widely in terms of specifics, but share a commonality of theme: it is the sense of imposed exile from society and the longing for simple human contact with friends and family outside the closed gates that drives every individual response. Permeating throughout the fears of the disease and the longing and loneliness is a distinct exhibition of belief that the singling out of their city is no random act of science, but divine punishment of some kind. Helping to foster this belief is Father Paneloux whose sermons are filled with stern Jesuit reasoning that Oran has committed sins so

great that simple forgiveness is not warranted. A Parisian journalist unlucky enough to happen to be in the city when the outbreak begins isn't buying this and is determined to escape back home to reunite with his wife. His attempts are foiled by the ineptitude of both the government and the underground. A paranoid criminal named Cottard attempts to aid Rambert in his escape. Alone among those trapped inside, Cottard is actually glad to see what effects the plague is having on the town. Suddenly, everyone is just as lonely and afraid as him. Not only that, he is making a killing in the booming business of smuggling that is another consequence of the epidemic. Another visit who got trapped by bad timing is Jean Tarrou and he has been carefully making notes of everything he's observed relating to the plague. Those observations stimulate him to organize sanitation duties with the help of volunteers. Meanwhile, just as Rambert is as about ready to put his escape strategy to the test, he learns that Dr. Rieux—who has been the leading figure in trying to fight the plague—has a wife on the outside experiencing her own medical quarantine as a patient being treated in a sanatorium. The sacrifice being made by Rieux inspires Tarrou to give up on his plan to escape and stay to fight the epidemic. The initial self-centered response of individuals to the quarantine as a personal tragedy eventually gives way to a widespread realization that everyone is affected equally even if in starkly different ways. The acceptance of the plague under these terms lessens the selfishness of the town, but does little to alleviate the collective disconsolation and hopelessness. Adding to the despair is a death toll affecting so many people that cremation is necessary to keep up. When the young child of Oran's magistrate succumbs to the suffering and perishes, Father Paneloux is moved to get another sermon. The theme of this sermon is plainly put: the plague is evidence enough that you either believe in Christianity wholeheartedly or you reject it outright. Not long afterward, Paneloux himself dies, but without manifesting any symptoms of the disease raving the population. In contrast to Paneloux, others who have shown victims begin to make miraculous recoveries and avoid death. At that point, Tarrou finally is diagnosed, but fails to recover and dies. He has become the exception, however, and soon the town is barely containing its desire to celebrate the evidence that the plague is diminishing and will soon disappear. Along among the quarantined not bursting with happiness at this thought is Cottard. On the day the gates to the town finally reopen, his madness finally overcomes him and he takes to the street randomly firing his gun until the police arrest him. The long-awaited reunion between Rambert and his wife takes place not back home in Paris, but in Oran. Dr. Rieux is not so lucky; his wife has died during the separation mandated by the quarantine. Flush the freedom to do whatever they want, the residents of town do little more than go back to their lives as they were before the plague arrived under the awareness that acting like everything is the same is an utter pretense. The unidentified narrator of these events finally reveals himself as the tale draws to a close. The chronicler was Dr. Rieux and his book was composed as a testament to the victims and those who fought it rather than as his own self-serving story as a personal victim of the tragedy. An attempt is made to end the story on an inspirational note with his observance that ultimately those trapped in Oran revealed the better side of human nature more often than the worst. That note of optimism is undercut by his haunting reminder that the microbe responsible for bubonic plague can lie dormant for so long that it creates the illusion of being gone forever when in reality, it has the power to spread into an epidemic with little warning. Cottard is Camus's

Work Cited

1. "Existentialism." The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 247–267. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0247. Accessed 12 Feb.

2020.
2. SparkNotes Editors. “SparkNote on The Plague.” SparkNotes LLC. n.d.. http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/plague/ (accessed February 11, 2020).