

Death and hope in Oran

*A review of Albert Camus's The Plague*

By Borjan Zic

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Albert Camus's *The Plague* is one of the great works of literature of the twentieth century. It is a well-crafted novel with a universal message, applicable across time and cultures. The plot centers on an outbreak of plague in Oran, a coastal town in Algeria, and chronicles the manner in which the lives of the town's citizenry are changed as a result, as well as the varying reactions of certain characters to the plague. Written during the time of the Nazi occupation of France, Camus employs the outbreak of plague and the resulting quarantine of the town as metaphorical representations of the Nazis and the suffering of the French people under the occupation. Besides the salience of its themes, the book is noteworthy for the fact that it marks an evolution in the thought of Camus from a form of existentialist nihilism (as seen in *The Stranger*) to a philosophy which recognizes certain values and ethics, leading to a more humanistic view of the world. As such, the most important value upheld in the novel is the need to struggle against evil, as represented by the plague. Thus, the book is to be commended for its political message. Additionally, Camus's character development and description of the feelings of loneliness and separation experienced by the townsfolk also contribute toward making this a great work, whose words and themes connect directly with the human experience and force the reader to reflect on the essential aspects of his existence.

The description and development of the various characters in the book are achieved with great skill, as each important figure represents an element of the occupation and resistance. In essence, Camus utilizes his characters in order to better convey certain values and strengthen his overall political message. The main protagonist is Dr. Rieux, a man who desires simply to carry out his professional mission, that of saving lives and healing the sick. Upon being offered the choice to join the resistance group organized to combat the plague more effectively, Rieux is not filled with heroic or idealistic thoughts. Instead, his justification for joining the resistance seems to be an intrinsic knowledge of the moral value inherent in fighting a disease which has caused much suffering and needless death. For Rieux, it is the awareness that “there are sick people and they need curing” which drives him to join the town's resistance movement. Through this characterization, Camus offers a portrayal of common humanity, one typified by a sense of goodness and duty which entails that the only logical and correct response to the evil of the plague is to struggle in order to defeat it. Another important character is that of Tarrou, meant to represent the idealistic resistance fighter. Tarrou provides another medium for Camus to advance the humanistic elements of his philosophy in the novel. This can be observed primarily from the fact that Tarrou proclaims the “path of sympathy” as a means for attaining internal peace and solace. Once again, the idea of sympathy is linked to the proposition that every individual has a moral duty to aid his fellow human beings in a time of distress or crisis. Camus also makes clear that this view should be seen as a basic tenet of human behavior and not a blinding ideological imperative, as Tarrou is indirectly criticized for the over zealotry of some of his

principles. The logical need to fight evil, and the idea that it is really the only choice for one who wishes to retain his bond with the rest of humanity, is also made clear by Camus's rhetoric, whereby those joining the resistance "knew it was the only thing to do." Further establishing this principle is the description of Grand, a character who joins the resistance movement and fulfills the logistical duties he is given with precision and perseverance, despite the fact that he is employed in a bureaucratic position which does not lend itself to traditional visions of glory. Yet Grand's skills are important to the overall success of the movement, and he is described as "the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary [resistance] groups." Therefore, Camus shows through Grand that every individual can be heroic by doing their part to achieve victory against the plague. As such, Grand, like the other two characters, provides an uplifting portrayal of the human spirit acting to fulfill its moral duty, thereby laying the foundation for Camus's greater statement of political commitment in the novel.

In terms of the human experience, Camus includes several passages that detail human loneliness and anguish under the conditions of the plague. In doing so, he employs diction and prose which vividly capture the emotions he intends to convey to the reader. For example, he discusses the "feeling of exile" which the plague engenders, "that sensation of a void within which never left us, that irrational longing to hark back to the past or else to speed up the march of time." In conjunction with this, Camus emphasizes "each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky", a situation which lent itself to a "sense of being abandoned." Hence, the citizens of the town are separated from the rest of humanity, creating an emptiness and lack of meaning in their daily lives. From this, it is apparent that Camus also partially intends the conditions of the plague to serve as a concrete reminder of the existential view of the human condition, whereby there is no greater meaning to existence. In this case, Camus's diction makes clear the frustrating nature of life under occupation, yet the novel also contains hope and advocates the need to persevere and lead a dignified existence in a world marked by loneliness and separation.

Finally, the novel's essential plotline, whereby the plague is resisted and eventually defeated, constitutes an inspiring political and moral message which provides a universal vision of humanity acting for good in a time of crisis. Moreover, Camus indicates that the plague, representative of evil, destruction and human suffering, can always recur unless those combating it continue to be vigilant in their struggle. This view is made clear when Camus states that the triumph over the plague was not a "final victory. It could only be the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its onslaughts." This reminder, addressed to all readers and humanity in general, is one that must be taken to heart and followed by individuals facing similar dangers in all times and places. One must always be cautious of the rise of forces which seek to undermine human security and happiness, a fact which necessitates a continual struggle against such 'pestilences,' whatever they might be. Consequently, Camus's statement of political commitment, together with his affirmation of human dignity and the need for human beings to act with moral rectitude, makes this work one which most assuredly deserves to be read.