

Vol. 41 No. 1

THE PLEIA

Camus

and

The
Plague

PLEA 

Legal Information for Everyone

WHAT WAS THE PLAGUE?

During and just after World War II, Albert Camus wrote *The Plague*. *The Plague* tells a tale of a contagion descending upon the Algerian city of Oran. Camus, then a rising star in French artistic and intellectual circles, used the book to explore the role of the state and the role of the citizen in a public health crisis. It weaves through such topics as the functions of elected authorities and public officials, the impacts of restricted movement, the scourge of profiteering, the shame of prison conditions, the need for personal responsibility, and the vitality of collective solidarity.

The Plague was an immediate hit in France. This success was not due to a sudden French interest in bacterial disease. Rather, its success was driven in part by a French desire for novels that mythologised France's tumultuous experience in World War II. Oran's battle against plague, after all, is not only a battle against disease. It is an allegory—a story with a second meaning—for how civilians battled against fascist and authoritarian government in France.

When Hitler's armies marched into France in 1940, the French Republic collapsed. France then came under rule of German Nazis and a collaborationist French government called the Vichy regime.

In response to this most undesirable rule, a movement called the French Resistance formed in the shadows. Resisters came from all ages, social classes, backgrounds, and beliefs. They shared a common goal: resisting the injustices of Naziism and France's new authoritarian government.

Historians estimate anywhere from 2% to 20% of the population took part in resistance. Some were resisters with a lowercase r, who performed isolated acts of defiance. They engaged in small acts ranging from raising French tricolour flags to helping people hide from police. Others were Resisters with a capital R, who formed small underground cells of organised fighting groups. They sabotaged the enemy, published newspapers, and helped the Allied armies.

Albert Camus was amongst the Resisters, which positioned him well to create a book about the Nazi occupation of France and how the French both collaborated with it and resisted it. Even the book's title drops a hint about its allegorical connection. The French title of *The Plague* is *La Peste*, and the French called their Nazi occupiers *la peste brune* (the brown pest), in reference to the Nazi's brown uniforms.

Good literature explores topics of timeless importance. *The Plague* illustrates this well. Not only has the world been locked in a battle with COVID-19, but we also have seen a rise in authoritarian forces: in 2020, The Economist Intelligence Unit reported another year of global decline for democracy. To be sure, we have not returned to the depths of World War II fascism. But powerful forces are pushing against liberal democracy and its embrace of minority rights and the rule of law. These facts make Camus' book once again relevant on two fronts: it can help us make sense of our battle with COVID-19 just as much as it can help us make sense of the dangers posed by newly-empowered authoritarians. With these understandings, PLEA has created an all-new, full-length teacher's guide: *Albert Camus' The Plague: The Learning Resource*. This issue of *The PLEA* will introduce you to some of the many ideas explored in our new resource.



DISCUSS

In *The Plague*, Camus writes “the only means of fighting a plague is—common decency.” Discuss this statement.

PEOPLE OF THE PLAGUE

Even though *The Plague's* characters have varied backgrounds, most all realise that their differences should not stop them from coming together to defeat the disease.



DR. BERNARD RIEUX

Rieux is the narrator of *The Plague*. He has the same approach to narration as he does to battling the disease: be honest and tell the truth as he sees it. He does not seek glory, but rather is motivated by his sense of duty as a doctor.



JEAN TARROU

Tarrou is an outsider to Oran. He creates sanitary squads, groups of people who voluntarily group together to fight the plague.



DR. CASTEL

Castel is an old, weathered doctor. He is the first person to identify the disease as plague, and creates an effective serum to fight off the disease.



... MONSIEUR OTHON

M. Othon is a magistrate, or judge. He respects rules and orders. Othon comes around to fighting the plague, at first by dropping quiet hints to others.



JOSEPH GRAND

Grand is a civil servant. He has been writing a novel for decades, but can't get past the first sentence. His quiet courage and ability to take direction well make him an invaluable fighter.



THE PREFECT

The prefect is Oran's governor. He is reluctant to take drastic action in the early days, preferring to downplay the threat.



RAYMOND RAMBERT

Rambert is a reporter from a Paris newspaper. When the city is put under quarantine, he tries to escape, but realises that he has an obligation to stay and fight.



DR. RICHARD

Dr. Richard is the chairman of Oran's medical association. He cannot create mandatory medical orders, and his powers are limited to advising the Prefect.



FATHER PANELOUX

Father Paneloux is a Jesuit priest. He tries to make sense of the plague through religion, and joins the sanitary squad's fight.



COTTARD

Cottard has spent his life running from the law. When the plague hits, he becomes a man-about-town who engages in profiteering.



MME. RIEUX

Mme. Rieux is Dr. Rieux's mother. She is a strong matriarch who demonstrates quiet courage in the face of danger.

MAPPING THE LIFE OF CAMUS

Authorial intent is the idea that we can find greater meaning in a book by considering what the author intended when writing it. Consider how Camus' life would have helped shape *The Plague*.

**1913
DRÉAN**

Camus is born to working-class French Algerian parents.



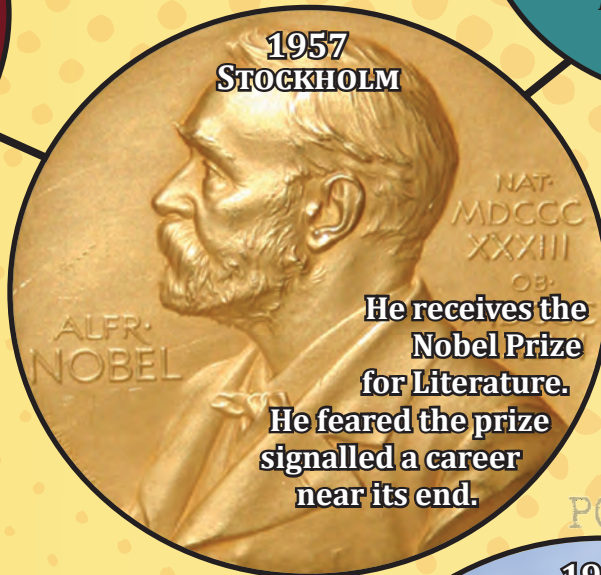
**1960
NEAR
VILLEBLEVIN**

Camus dies in a car crash. In the car's trunk was a draft of his unfinished biography, *The First Man*.

**1951
PARIS**

The Rebel is published, its critique of communism costing him many friendships.

**1957
STOCKHOLM**



He receives the Nobel Prize for Literature. He feared the prize signalled a career near its end.

**1947
PARIS**

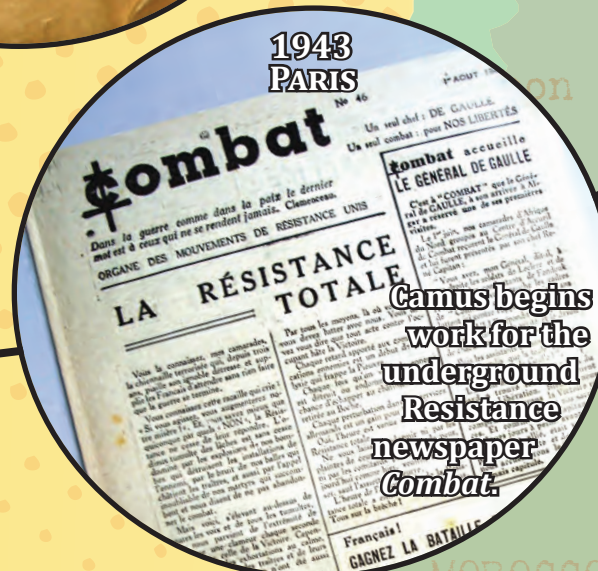
The Plague is published, cementing Camus as a celebrity in France and beyond.

**1943
NEAR
LE CHAMBON**

He begins writing *The Plague* while living by a hotbed of Resistance.

**1943
SWITZERLAND**
An early chapter of *The Plague* is smuggled out of France and published.

**1943
PARIS**



Camus begins work for the underground Resistance newspaper *Combat*.

1914
MARNE RIVER
NEAR BRASLES



His father was drafted into the army and dies in a World War I battle against Germany.

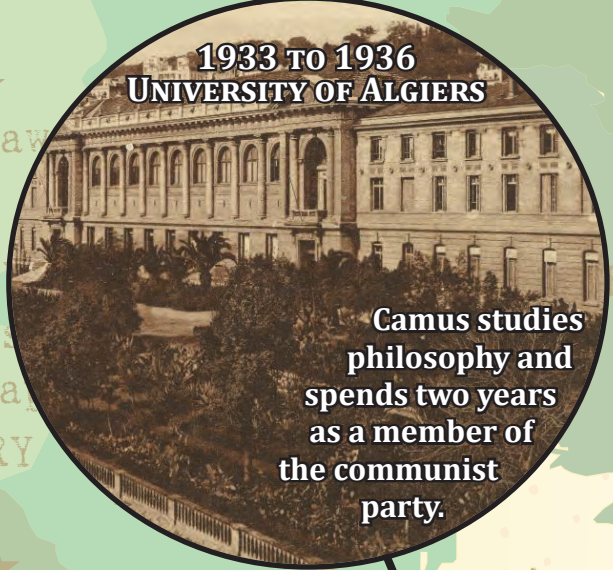
1930
L'ÉCOLE
NORMALE
SUPÉRIEURE,
ALGIERS

He catches tuberculosis and is forced to take a year away from school.

1914
BELCOURT,
ALGIERS


His now fatherless family moves in with his maternal grandmother.

1933 TO 1936
UNIVERSITY OF ALGIERS



Camus studies philosophy and spends two years as a member of the communist party.

1942
ORAN



Back in Algeria, he rises to fame with the release of *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

1940
PARIS

He begins work at a newspaper while writing plays, fiction, and philosophy on the side.

1940
LYON



Nazis invade France. His health keeps him from joining the army so Camus moves to Lyon.



CAMUS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

In Part One of *The Plague*, a character attempts suicide. It is significant that suicide appears so early in the book.

The idea of suicide was central to Camus' philosophy of life. He opened his philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* with this statement:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.

In other words, he was asking what is the point of life? Why should we live?

Camus asked this question in *The Myth of Sisyphus* at a time when organised religion was in steep decline. Because religion provides society with a metanarrative—an overarching explanation or truth that can give meaning to life—its decline led to new questions about life's purpose.

Camus thought that purpose could be found if we considered our lives like the life of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was a Greek mythological character. His most clever accomplishment was cheating death. As punishment for dodging fate, Zeus sent Sisyphus to Hades for eternity. There, he had to roll a boulder up a hill. Every time Sisyphus would get the boulder to the top, it would roll back down. The punishment made Sisyphus's life an absurd task.

If our lives are like Sisyphus's—seemingly absurd and meaningless—then what is the point of living?

Camus' answer was that we can accept that life is absurd, without having to give up on life itself. In fact, life's absurdities can give it meaning.

Think of it this way. The search for meaning is complex. We will make many discoveries. We will become aware of many contradictions. And we will also find ourselves in many dead-ends. But above all, the more we search for truth and meaning, the more we will realise that it may be impossible to find a single, all-encompassing Truth. As Camus said,

it is bad to stop, hard to be satisfied with a single way of seeing, to go without contradiction, perhaps the most subtle of all spiritual forces. The preceding merely defines a way of thinking. But the point is to live.

If we choose to live, we have the opportunity to explore many of life's ideas and truths.

If we accept Camus' point of view, this means that our search for meaning will be like Sisyphus' struggle with the boulder: We can never fully complete the task. We will find one truth, and then perhaps another, and yet another...

This is why Camus said that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." If the search for truth drives our existence, we should choose to make it a happy struggle.



DISCUSS

Do you agree with Camus? Is it difficult if not impossible to find a single Truth about life? If so, how can we find happy fulfilment in our search for meaning?

CAMUS AND THE DEATH PENALTY

In *The Plague*, an asthma patient says “my real interest in life was the death penalty.” The death penalty is when the state kills someone as punishment for a crime.

The patient’s interest in the death penalty began in his childhood. His father was a Director of Public Prosecutions, a lawyer responsible for prosecuting criminal offences. As a young boy, he watched the trial of a man accused of murder. During the court proceedings, his father—whom he viewed as a decent man—was “clamouring for the prisoner’s death.” Such harsh punishments, the boy was led to believe, were “inevitable for the building up of the new world in which murder would cease to be.”

The patient’s views changed when he watched a man being executed by firing squad. From that day on, he was unable to sleep well. The horrible event led him to reject sophisticated arguments for killing another person. In the patient’s words,

if you gave in once, there was no reason for not continuing to give in. It seems to me that history has borne me out; today there’s a sort of competition who will kill the most. They’re all mad crazy over murder and they couldn’t stop killing men even if they wanted to.

His experiences with the death penalty—from seeing his father clamour for the death of another person to witnessing an execution first-hand—made him realise that the killing had to stop. He no longer believed that the death penalty could be justified.

The patient had much in common with Albert Camus. Camus spent much of his life opposing the death penalty. This opposition appeared in many of his works. In addition to *The Plague*, his breakthrough novel *The Stranger* raises questions about it. More pointed is his 1957 essay “Reflections on the Guillotine,” a passionate and well-researched argument for ending the death penalty.

Camus’ opposition to the death penalty began with a story that a young Camus learned about his deceased father Lucien. Lucien left early one morning to watch a public execution by guillotine. The execution, the elder Camus believed, was justified, for the condemned man had brutally murdered an entire family. Nonetheless, Lucien was sickened by what he saw. He returned home, laid down, and threw up.

This childhood story founded Camus’ basis for opposing the death penalty. However, there was a brief time at the close of World War II when his opposition wavered. Camus believed that the horrible crimes of Nazi collaborators justified their executions.

However, only a few months later, Camus began to see an excess of revenge unfolding in France. Many people were clamouring for collaborators to be executed. Camus still believed that some French collaborators deserved execution for their crimes. However, he now worried that justice was belated and its implementation was inconsistent. For France to heal, it was time to move on from executions as their form of justice.



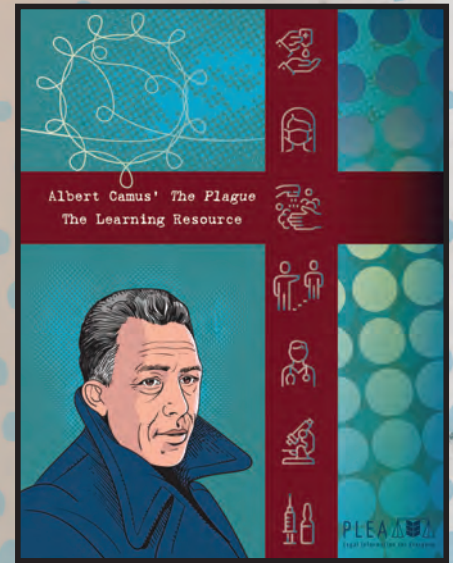
DISCUSS

Canada does not have a death penalty. But many other countries do. Consider that research shows that the death penalty does very little—if anything—to reduce murders. Also consider that in several American cases, evidence emerged that proved a person innocent, *after* they were executed. Can the death penalty be justified in democratic societies today?

MORE TO LEARN!

Literary critic Germaine Brée has said that “justice is no abstract concept for Camus... it is a necessity born of his intense power of understanding the misery of others.” There is so much more to learn about Camus, *The Plague*, and what his life and books can teach us about laws and justice.

To help guide this learning, check out PLEA's all-new **Albert Camus' *The Plague*: The Learning Resource**. This comprehensive guide can help you understand and teach about *The Plague*. Ideal for English B30. Get your copy at teachers.plea.org.



ALSO CHECK OUT THESE GREAT LEARNING RESOURCES AT TEACHERS.PLEA.ORG. AVAILABLE FOR FREE, PRINT OR DIGITAL.

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