



Introduction



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. The story 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, Camus biographer Maria Ardizio tells us that its success was driven in part by a French desire for novels that mythologised France's tumultuous experience in World War II.'The battle against plague in Oran, after all, is not just a battle against disease. It is an allegory for the battle against fascist and authoritarian government in France. When Hitler's armies marched into France in 1940, the French republic collapsed. In its place came a new French government called Vichy. Vichy, while independent of Germany, collaborated with Hitler and the Nazis.

Convergent circumstances in the world today remind us of the perennial relevancy of *The Plague*. Alongside the onset of COVID-19, we are witnessing the rising fortunes of authoritarian forces. In 2020, the Economist Intelligence Unit—a United Kingdom-based research organisation—reported yet another year of global decline for democracy. The western world has 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.

With this understanding, PLEA created *Albert Camus' The Plague: The Learning Resource*. Designed for use with Saskatchewan's English Language Arts B30 curriculum, this resource is geared towards Unit II, The Social Experience:

Every person is part of the larger society and is shaped by and responsible to it. Historically and currently, people have strived to create a better society that attends to the individual as well as to the collective good. Human endeavour, history, and literature attest to the ongoing challenge of achieving balance between individual and societal concerns, rights, and responsibilities; between individual aspirations and societal needs; between personal ambition and the common good; between individual beliefs and societal values. This ongoing challenge manifests itself in conformity and rebellion, causes and crusades. In this unit,

students examine, critique, and interrogate the society in which they live and consider the actions students can take to create the kind of society in which they would like to live.²

This resource charts a path through *The Plague* that will help teachers fulfill this approach.

Using This Resource

Albert Camus' The Plague: The Learning Resource contains tools teachers have come to expect for exploring a novel with their students. Pre-reading activities lay the groundwork for understanding the novel, chapter questions provide opportunities to identify and discuss the book's events and themes, and post-reading questions help set students on their own unique paths for deeper inquiry.

As well, this resource includes informational handouts that give meaningful contexts to the novel. Handouts fit into one of four broad themes:

- Literary Concepts handouts draw links between the study of literature and the structure of *The Plague*.
- The Philosophy of Camus handouts build understandings of the mind that shaped *The Plague*.
- Health Concepts handouts explore diseases and how we approach them as a society.
- Historical Context handouts help recreate *The Plague's* allegorical backdrop of World War II France.

While any handout could function as a stand-alone reading, their design keeps with Jerome Bruner's concept of instructional scaffolding. As the resource progresses, ideas are built upon each other. Teachers may wish to use these handouts with students, use them as their own background reading, or any combination of the two approaches.

Accessing *The Plague* in Multiple Formats

This resource uses *The Plague's* standard English translation by Stuart Gilbert, with page numbers linking to the Penguin Modern Classics edition. For teachers without copies of *The Plague*, the Gilbert translation can be found online, including audiobook format.

Albert Camus' The Plague: The Learning Resource begins by establishing understandings of literary techniques, health concepts, and some of Camus' philosophies. Once these baselines are established, the resource gradually shifts its emphasis toward the historical contexts that form the novel's allegory: the Nazi occupation of France, and how the French both collaborated with it and resisted it.

In addition, this resource features a handful of "Think Local" activities. These are more current, and more Saskatchewan-focussed. Their inclusion is designed to bring the novel and associated readings closer to home.

On the whole, as the curriculum asks, students will come away from their study of *The Plague* not just with a stronger understanding of the big ideas contained within the novel; they will also be better-equipped to examine, critique, and interrogate the society in which they live, and be better-able to consider the actions needed to create the kind of society in which they would like to live. Students

will have contemplated the ideals of justice, the balance between individual rights with societal needs, the importance of human decency in building a society, and the power of literature to make us think about and act upon these ideas.

Of course, no single learning resource can be all-encompassing. Teachers are encouraged to use *Albert Camus' The Plague: The Learning Resource* as one piece of an overall approach to *The Plague*. Teachers also are encouraged to adapt the information, questions, and activities in this resource to meet the unique circumstances of their students, classrooms, and communities.

As the professionals closest to the actual learning taking place in Saskatchewan classrooms, PLEA is always interested in hearing about your experiences with our learning resources. What works? What can we do better? What else do you need? Drop us a line at plea@plea.org or head to teachers.plea.org and click on Contact.

¹ Maria Ardizio. *Camus*. Duculot, 1982, p. 143.

² Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. *English Language Arts 30*, 2013, p. 10.



Pre-Reading

The People of *The Plague*

There are seven major and several minor characters in *The Plague*. Despite their varied backgrounds, most of these people come together to fight the disease. Spoiler alert! These descriptions reveal some of the book's plot.



Dr. Bernard Rieux

Rieux is the narrator of *The Plague*. He chooses not to reveal this until the closing chapter. His approach to narration and to battling the plague are the same: be honest and tell the truth as he sees it. His fight against the plague is motivated by a sense of duty as a medical doctor. He is not seeking glory. Unfortunately, Rieux's wife leaves Oran before the plague strikes, and she dies before the battle with plague is over.



Jean Tarrou

Tarrou is an outsider to Oran. He finds great pleasure in observing the mundane habits of the locals, and journals about them. The narrator sometimes uses Tarrou's journals to fill gaps in his story. Tarrou's greatest contribution to fighting the plague is creating voluntary sanitary squads: he comes up with the plan when Oran's government proposes conscripting people to fight it.



Joseph Grand

Grand is a civil servant. Much of his life is marked by hesitancy and an inability to take self-directed action. He has been writing a novel for decades, but can't get past the first sentence. Grand has been lingering in an entry-level job for his entire life, despite being promised career advancement. Nonetheless, he has a quiet courage and takes direction well, which makes him an invaluable contributor to the fight against the plague.



Raymond Rambert

Rambert is a reporter from a leading Paris newspaper. He is in Oran to research the living conditions of the Arab people. When the city is put under quarantine, he tries to find ways to escape so that he can return to his wife. On the eve of his escape, he realises that he has an obligation to stay and fight the plague.



Mme. Rieux

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



Father Paneloux

Father Paneloux is a Jesuit priest. He delivers two major sermons to Oran. The first blames the people of Oran for the plague, saying it is punishment for their sins. The second sermon claims that the plague is a test of Oran's faith. Though Paneloux begins to contribute to the sanitary squad's fight against the plague, he keeps his rigid religious beliefs in place until the very end. He dies of a virulent strain of the plague, without seeking the help of a doctor.



Cottard

Cottard has spent his life running from the law. He attempts suicide in the opening chapters of the book, seemingly in distress over a past crime that is never revealed. However, when the plague strikes, he feels a sort of solidarity with the townsfolk, who are now also living in constant fear. Cottard embraces his newfound fearlessness, becoming a man-about-town while engaging in profiteering.



Dr. Castel

Castel is an old and weathered doctor. When the mysterious disease strikes Oran, he is the first person to identify it as plague. He is also the person who creates an effective serum to fight off the disease.



Monsieur Othon

M. Othon is a magistrate, or judge. He tends to be conservative and feels obliged to follow rules and orders. In his mind, rules should apply equally to everyone. He comes around to fighting the plague, at first dropping quiet hints to others. He eventually dies of plague, some time after his young son suffered a gruelling death.



Monsieur Michel

M. Michel is the concierge at Dr. Rieux's surgery. He is the first person to die of plague. His death marks the transition from early days of confusion about dead rats to a panicked realisation that something is seriously wrong in Oran.



The Prefect

A prefect is a type of governor. In the days that Algeria was under French colonial rule, prefects were appointed by the French government. Oran's prefect is reluctant to take drastic action in the early days of the plague, preferring to minimise the threat.



Dr. Richard

Dr. Richard is the chairman of Oran's medical association. Despite his position, Richard has little ability to create mandatory medical orders. He can only advise the Prefect on what should be done. Regardless, his preference is to take a wait-and-see approach rather than risk taking bold action.



Pre-Reading

Who was Albert Camus?

Albert Camus is one of the most widely-read French-language authors in the English world. Born in Algeria in 1913, Camus rose to literary fame in World War II, received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, and had his life cut short in a motor vehicle accident in 1960.



Undated photo of Albert Camus.

Camus was born to working-class parents, his mother Catherine of Spanish and father Lucien of French origins but both Algerian born. At the time, Algeria was part of France and had a sizeable European population, known as *pieds-noirs*. When Camus was only one, his father was drafted to fight in World War I and died in battle. Although France provided the family with benefits and health care to compensate for the loss, the father's death spiralled the relatively poor family into deeper poverty.

Camus' widowed mother—who was partially deaf and suffered from a speech impediment—was forced to set up home with Camus' maternal grandmother, in a small home in an outlying area of Algiers. She supported young Camus and his brother Lucien by working as a house cleaner, her hard work and dedication contributing to Camus' great admiration for his mother. Exemplifying this childhood with little, Camus had to play soccer on the sly because his grandmother worried that the sport would wear out his shoes.

Camus never looked back upon poverty with bitterness. He believed it had shaped him for the better, imparting in him to the work ethic and moral principles of the working class. Nor did poverty keep young Camus from excelling in school. An elementary teacher, Lucien Germain, spotted and nurtured his talent. This helped him gain a scholarship to a prestigious Algerian high school.

In 1930, tuberculosis forced Camus to take a year off from high school. The disease dogged him his entire life, damaging his physical vigour and closing many options for work in his adulthood. Nonetheless, he finished high school and moved on to the University of Algiers, earning a degree in philosophy in 1936.

Camus' university years were eventful. He worked various jobs to fund his studies, married and left Simone Hié, his first wife, and spent two years as a member of the Algerian Communist Party. He also developed a lifelong interest in theatre. Theatre, for Camus, was much like the soccer he enjoyed as a youth: it required teamwork and a mutual agreement to follow some common rules. He joined



Camus, top row second from right, with other students and teachers at *l'École normale supérieure*, 1931.

a communist theatre group known as The Worker's Theatre, where he acted in and wrote plays that exposed the plights of working people. The radical nature of the work caught the eye of the authorities, who tried to suppress some of the theatre's work.

University years also strengthened Camus' interest in the living conditions of Algeria's Arabs. Even though Algeria was integrated into France, its native Arabs were treated as second-class citizens, lacking many of the rights and services that Europeans in Algeria received. Camus deeply and rightly believed this was an injustice. He felt that France's governance of Algeria served him well and he wanted for all what he had received.

Out of university, Camus became a journalist for *Alger républicain*, a newspaper that sought to bring fairness and equality to everyone in Algeria. Camus often wrote stories exposing the unfairness with which France treated Algeria's Arabs. In 1940, he moved to Paris to work as a layout editor for *Paris-soir*, a newspaper he did not particularly like. All the time, he continued writing plays, fiction, and philosophy on the side.

When the Nazis began their World War II march toward Paris, Camus's poor health left him unable to join the army. He instead moved to Lyon, married Francine Faure, and in 1942 returned to Algeria, where he took up teaching in Oran. That same year, at the age of 29, Camus was propelled to fame with the release of his critically-acclaimed books *L'Étranger* (The Stranger) and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (The Myth of Sisyphus).

Camus' time in Oran was not all good fortune. His tuberculosis flared up, so on a doctor's advice he took a retreat in the French Alps. While there, the Allies seized Algeria from France's Vichy regime. This made a return to Oran to be with his wife an impossibility. Camus instead relocated to Paris in 1943, where he helped the French Resistance in their battle against the Nazis and their French collaborators, most notably by working as a writer and editor for the underground newspaper *Combat*.



Camus and his wife, Francine Faure, with their daughter Catherine and son Jean, 1945.

By the war's close, Camus was well-established in the Paris intellectual scene. He was friends with world-class thinkers such as the feminist Simone de Beauvoir and the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He was also well-known as a womaniser. Publication of further books such as 1947's *La Peste* (The Plague), an allegorical exploration of France's Nazi occupation, pushed his star even higher. Camus was now an established celebrity in France and beyond.

With fame often comes controversy, and Camus did not disappoint. His 1951 publication of *L'Homme révolté* (The Rebel) caused him a falling out with many prominent thinkers in communist circles. The French Communist Party was powerful and popular, but Camus grew concerned with how some communists would blindly toe the party line. *The Rebel* challenged some tenets of communism and questioned notions about achieving revolution and lasting change through violence. Despite these concerns about communism, Camus still remained disillusioned by the follies of capitalism. Thus, in many ways he was caught between two opposing sides of a polarised battle of ideas.

When the Algerian War of Independence broke out in November 1954, Camus again found himself somewhere between two deeply opposed sides. The war was particularly nasty, with the French using grossly-oppressive tactics and the independence fighters often resorting to terrorism against civilians. Camus was revolted by the cruel excesses of both sides. Ideally, Camus wanted Algeria to be a pluralistic place where cultural differences were respected. In his mind, this meant Algeria would remain part of France, but the French needed to live up to their ideals of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.” This position left him roundly condemned on both sides, fighting the tides of history, and has contributed to his homeland virtually shunning him to this very day.

Following a failed speech in Algeria in 1956 to make a call for peace, he threw up his hands and went silent on the issue. That is, until he invited questions on the Algerian war at a question-and-answer session in 1957. A student skeptical of his position took him up on the offer. Camus made it clear that he found the French army’s actions repulsive, but the student leaned into him further. In the ensuing argument, Camus was reported to have said “At this moment, bombs are being thrown in the trolleys of Algiers, and my mother might find herself in one of these trolleys, and if that’s your justice, I prefer my mother to justice.” Indeed, Camus’ mother still lived in Algeria and civilians were being targeted by Algerian nationalists. However, the comment caused an uproar as it was interpreted by some as a blanket statement of support for “mother” France.



Camus, with his wife, being congratulated by the Swedish ambassador to France, for having received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1957 should have been a happy time for Camus by virtue of receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet, he agonised over the award. He feared such a recognition—usually given to much older authors—signalled a career near its end. He spoke to this insecurity in a self-aware acceptance speech, remarking that he was “almost young, rich only in his doubts.”²²

The fear of a career near its end tragically proved prophetic. Shortly after New Year’s Day, 1960, the car that Camus was a passenger in crashed on a straight stretch of road in north-central France. Camus was not wearing his seatbelt and died instantly, at the age of 46. His publisher, who was driving, died a few days later. The circumstances surrounding the crash have led to speculation that Camus was assassinated by Russian KGB spies in retaliation for his rejection of communism and strong criticism of Soviet repression of Hungarians, although many people—including Camus’ daughter—have dismissed this theory.



Camus’ gravestone.

In the car’s trunk was Camus’ unfinished autobiography *Le Premier homme* (The First Man). The manuscript was not released until 1994, as his daughter Catherine believed that time needed to pass before its publication. This is to say nothing of the difficult task of interpreting Camus’ remarkably poor handwriting. Being an unfinished manuscript, *The First Man* provides a particularly unvarnished look inside Camus’ mind.

Albert Camus left us a profound legacy of literature and philosophy. Like everyone, he was not perfect. But Camus stood out. He was deeply thoughtful, critical of injustice, and wise enough to see the limits of blindly following any single school of thought.

Discuss

1. 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.”³ How would Camus’ early life have contributed to his conception of justice?
2. Authorial intent is the literary idea that we can find greater meaning in a book by considering what the author intended when writing it.
 - a) How does knowing an author’s life story help us understand their book?
 - b) Is it necessary to know an author’s intent to make sense of a book?
 - c) Even if it is not necessary to know an author’s intent, is it helpful?

¹ quoted in Oliver Todd and Benjamin Ivry. *Albert Camus: A Life*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, p. 379.

² Albert Camus. Speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1957. www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/

³ quoted in Mark Ome. *The Development of Albert Camus’s Concerns for Social and Political Justice*. Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007, p. 69.



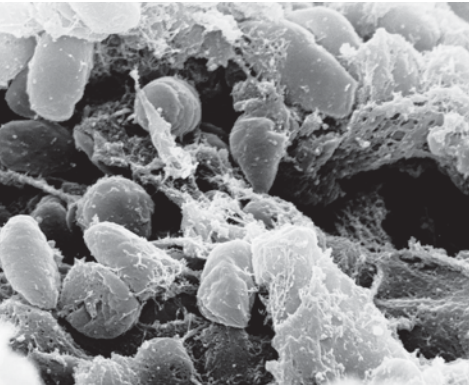
Pre-Reading

What is Plague?

The Plague tells a story about a disease outbreak. More specifically, it chronicles the spread of the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, also known as *Y. pestis* or plague. Over the course of history, plague has infected hundreds of millions of people.

Y. pestis can quickly reproduce once it finds its way inside a body. It causes three different types of illness: bubonic plague, pneumonic plague, and septicaemic plague.

Bubonic plague is the most common form of plague. It produces flu-like symptoms, such as fever and fatigue. When the bacteria reaches the lymph nodes, it quickly reproduces, inflaming the lymph nodes and filling them with pus. An inflamed, pus-filled lymph node is called a bubo. This is where we get the name bubonic plague. *Y. pestis* is usually transmitted through flea bites: the risk of human-to-human transmission is incredibly low. Symptoms will appear in 1-7 days, and if left untreated the chance of death ranges from 30-100%. If bubonic plague is diagnosed and treated in time, recovery is very likely.



A cluster of *Yersinia pestis* bacteria inside a flea. The bacteria is named after the French/Swiss doctor Alexandre Yersin, who co-discovered it in 1894.

Y. pestis may also infect the lungs. This form of the disease is called **pneumonic plague**. Symptoms include vomiting and coughing up blood. Most cases of pneumonic plague are a progression of bubonic plague, although human-to-human transmission can happen through airborne droplets. Symptoms will appear within 24 hours, and death within three days is almost certain if the disease is left untreated. If it is diagnosed and treated in a timely fashion, recovery is very likely. Pneumonic plague is the rarest form of the disease.

The most deadly form of plague is **septicaemic plague**. It occurs if the bloodstream becomes densely infected with *Y. pestis* bacteria. Like pneumonic plague, septicaemic plague is most often a progression of bubonic plague. However, in some instances it can appear without an initial onset of bubonic plague. Symptoms include high fever and organ shut-down. If left untreated, it is fatal within hours of onset.

Regardless of the form of plague, death often was an extremely unpleasant experience. This is true for both the patient and those around them. During a 1347 outbreak, an Italian friar rather graphically described death from plague:

The burn blisters appeared, and boils developed in different parts of the body: on the sexual organs, and others on the thighs, or on the arms, and in others on the neck. At first these were of the size of the hazelnut and the patient was seized by violent shivering fits, which soon rendered him so weak that he could no longer stand upright, but he was



Depiction of death carts taking away bodies during the Great Plague of Milan, 1629-1631. It killed approximately one million people.

forced to lie on his bed, consumed by a violent fever and overcome by great tribulation. Soon the boils grew to the size of a walnut, then to that of a hen's egg or a goose's egg, and they were exceedingly painful, and irritated the body, causing it to vomit blood by vitiating the juices. The blood rose from the affected lungs to the throat producing a putrefying and ultimately decomposing effect on the whole body. The sickness lasted three days, and on the fourth, at the latest, the patient succumbed.'

How is Plague Spread?

Human-to-human transmission of pneumonic plague is possible, via airborne droplets. There also is a very slim possibility of plague spreading from infected animal fluids or feces, if they make contact with broken skin. However, plague is primarily spread by flea bites.

If a flea is infected with plague, the bacteria will cause the flea's digestive system to plug up. This means that the blood it drinks cannot reach its stomach. As the flea begins to starve, it becomes voraciously hungry. In a futile attempt to eat, it bites more victims, more and more times. The flea ultimately starves to death, but not before aggressively spreading *Y. pestis*.

Most any mammal can be a carrier of plague. *Y. pestis* could live in mice, squirrels, prairie dogs, chipmunks, and voles. Even cats and dogs can contract plague from flea bites or eating an infected rodent. However, rodents are the usual culprits. Once a mammal has contracted the disease, it can spread plague to uninfected fleas who bite the animal.

If an outbreak in an animal population such as a city's rats is big enough, the rat population as a whole will begin to die off. This leads hungry fleas to look to other sources of blood, such as pets and humans. Scenarios such as this spark plague pandemics.

The Rise and Fall of Plague

History's most infamous plague outbreaks are the Plague of Justinian and the Black Death.

The Plague of Justinian ravaged the Byzantine Empire, an area surrounding much of the Mediterranean Ocean. Between 541 and 549, it killed an estimated 25-100 million people.

The Black Death was even more harmful. It started in China in around 1340, where it killed about 60 million people. Trade routes and wars brought the disease to Europe. Between 1347 and 1351, it killed almost half the continent's population, an estimated 75-200 million people.



The Dance of Death (1493) by Michael Wolgemut. Death from plague, war, famine, and other atrocities were common in Europe of the Late Middle Ages. It inspired the Danse Macabre artistic genre, meant to signify that death unites us all.

There have been many other outbreaks of plague, big and small. For example,

- the Great Plague of Seville (1647–1652) killed almost half a million people in Spain.
- the Persian Plague (1772-1773) killed roughly 2 million people across the Persian empire.
- the Bombay Plague (1896-1897) killed about 21,000 people in Mumbai. It was a flare-up of the Third Plague Pandemic, that took an estimated 12 million lives in Asia over its 100-year run.

Advances in DNA science have made it possible to identify *Y. pestis* as the cause of other historical pandemics. For example, China was hit by plague 2,200 years ago, as was Greece 2,500 years ago.

Looking back even further, researchers have identified the presence of *Y. pestis* in 4,800-year-old skeletons from Russia, Estonia, and Poland. The *Y. pestis* that infected these people differed from the *Y. pestis* of more recent plagues. This earlier form of *Y. pestis* could not live inside fleas, because it lacked a particular gene. Scientists believe ancient plague was spread by contaminated food, airborne droplets, and other bodily fluids.

Can Plague Strike Us Today?

Plague is no longer a threat to humanity. The identification of the *Y. pestis* bacteria in the late 19th century paved the way for treatments and vaccines.

Nevertheless, isolated cases continue to pop up. Every year a few hundred or sometimes a thousand people will come down with plague, mostly in the global south. And while the United States has seen a handful of cases in recent years, Canada has been more fortunate. The occasional case will pop up in wild animals and pets, but our last reported human case was in 1939.

For those unfortunate enough to contract plague, advances in science and medicine have greatly helped people survive. Only about 10-15% of today's plague cases prove fatal.

Discuss

1. Now you know a bit more about plague, think about the possibilities for using literature to teach us about diseases.
 - a) Are there things that literature can accomplish that science cannot?
 - b) Are there things that science can accomplish that literature cannot?
2. Albert Camus never lived through an outbreak of *Y. pestis*. Yet he wrote one of the greatest books about the disease. His understanding of plague was built through research of pandemics.
 - a) Is it necessary to experience something first-hand to have a good understanding of it?
 - b) What is lost in a perspective if there is an absence of first-hand experience?
3. While you read *The Plague*, consider what elements of the experience are missing or poorly represented.
 - a) Can any piece of writing be perfect or all-encompassing?
 - b) What expectations for the book are reasonable to have?

¹ quoted in Nicholas A Christakis. *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live*, Hachette Book Group, 2020, p. 77-78.

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Introduction

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