



## Post-Reading

# Concepts to Consider

Good literature often raises more questions than it answers. Below are some questions to consider about *The Plague* and the issues it raises.

1. Father Paneloux opens his first sermon with the words “Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it!” (80). Look at Paneloux’s actions as the plague progresses. Did Paneloux deserve his fate? Did anybody in Oran deserve their fate?
2. Dr. Rieux reveals himself to be the narrator of the book. Think back to the handout on objectivity, and what transpired in *The Plague*. How well did Rieux live up to his own ideal of being objective? To help you along...
  - think about the ways that Rieux was constricted by limited information
  - ask if there are times when Rieux was coloured by a perceptual filter
  - think about moments when there would be too much information and Rieux must prioritise what he reports

Do you think he achieved these goals? What ways did he succeed and fail as a narrator?

3. Some characters, such as M. Othon and Father Paneloux, have changing attitudes as the book progresses. How do their attitudes change? What prompts these changes? How do the characters in *The Plague* react to their changes? If someone switches sides, should we scorn them for their past beliefs, or should we embrace them for their change of heart?
4. The descent of plague onto Oran brings a new sense of spirit to Cottard. He is no longer suicidal and in despair. He emerges from the shadows, and enters a life of profiteering. Literary critic Donald Haggis has suggested

his activity in the “black market” during the epidemic, springs not so much from a deliberate evil intention to take advantage of others, as from a moral abdication that is the consequence of his inner despair.<sup>1</sup>

Do you agree with this assessment? What was causing Cottard’s inner despair? Could a kinder, more restorative justice system have helped Cottard?

5. In Part One Chapter 3, an innkeeper accuses Tarrou of being a fatalist. Fatalism is the belief that fate is largely out of our hands. Whatever happens *must* happen, and there is little we can do about it. A fatalist is not interested in the cause of an event, but rather the significance of an event. Think more deeply about the idea of fatalism, then look back at Tarrou’s actions during the plague. Is Tarrou—or any other character—a fatalist? Is fatalism an acceptable way to approach a plague?

6. Literary critic Edwin Moses says Camus tried to convince the reader that Rieux modelled the best way to approach a crisis. He said:

Camus will try to convince the reader that his (and the narrator Rieux's) program for action in the face of the existential absurd is the proper one: that one ought not make futile attempts at escape, like the early Rambert; or prey upon suffering, like Cottard, or try to aggrandize oneself by becoming a saint, like Tarrou; but rather that, like Rieux, one ought to make a total and loving commitment to his fellow sufferers.<sup>2</sup>

Do you agree that Rieux modelled admirable behaviour? How did he do this? What other characters did admirable things?

7. There are only a handful of women in *The Plague*, and none succumb to the disease. In fact, a young girl is amongst the first to fight off the pneumonic version of plague, towards the close. Consider these two other strong—and also matriarchal—characters:
- Mme. Rieux, Dr. Rieux's mother
  - The Old Spanish Woman, who Rambert stays with as he plots his escape

What do we learn from them? How are their contributions key to the battle against the plague?

8. Weather plays a significant role in *The Plague*, framing the events and perhaps even shaping and reacting to them, too. What role does weather in general and Mother Earth more broadly play in *The Plague*?

9. Cottard raises questions about how a plague can impact our sense of mutual trust. He says:  
You can't trust your neighbour; he may pass the disease on to you without your knowing it, and take advantage of a moment of inadvertence on your part to infect you. (160)

What ways do the people of Oran act untrustworthy? What ways do the people of Oran keep their sense of trust, while also navigating an environment of disease? Can a society survive without a sense of mutual trust?

10. Consider the role of the media in *The Plague*, in particular the traditional and upstart newspapers. In what ways is the media environment of Oran similar to and different from the traditional and social media environment of today? You may want to consider this question in light of the media reaction to COVID-19.

11. Consider these quotes from *The Plague*:

- On this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. (207)
- From now on, it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us. (52)
- the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency. (136)

In what ways does the novel and its characters demonstrate these statements? Do you agree with these statements?

12. Think about the relevancy of *The Plague* today. How relevant is the book to the fight against COVID-19? How relevant is the book to the fight against fascist and authoritarian forces? To answer these questions, it may be helpful to think about what things the book gets right, and what things it is missing or gets wrong.

13. Would you join the “sanitary squads” or Resistance, against either a disease or an authoritarian force? If so, which character in *The Plague* would you be most like?
14. Fables and myths are ways we make sense of the world. Would you consider *The Plague* a fable or myth? If so, how?
15. Look more deeply into the French colonisation of Algeria, and the Algerian War of Independence. How could *The Plague* apply to Algeria?
16. During his time living in Algeria just prior to World War II, Camus wrote:

On any occasion, progress is made every time a political problem is replaced by a human problem.<sup>3</sup>

Do you agree with this statement? By presenting the Nazi occupation of France as a disease, in what ways does *The Plague* live up to this statement?

<sup>1</sup> Donald Haggis. *Albert Camus: La Peste*. Barron’s Educational Series, New York, 1962, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Moses. “Functional Complexity: The Narrative Techniques of ‘The Plague’.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, Autumn 1974, page 421.

<sup>3</sup> quoted in Mark Ome. *The Development of Albert Camus’s Concerns for Social and Political Justice*. Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007, p. 68.