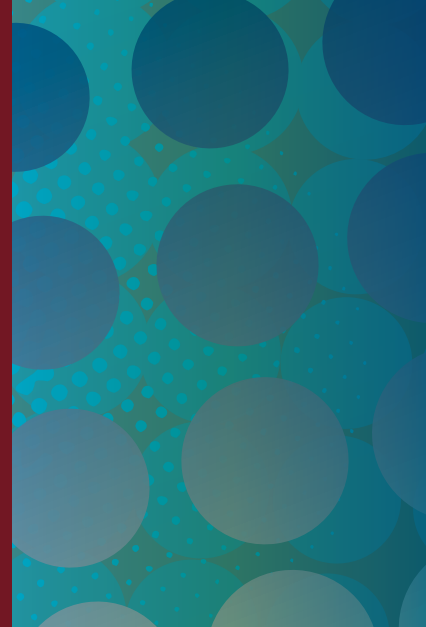
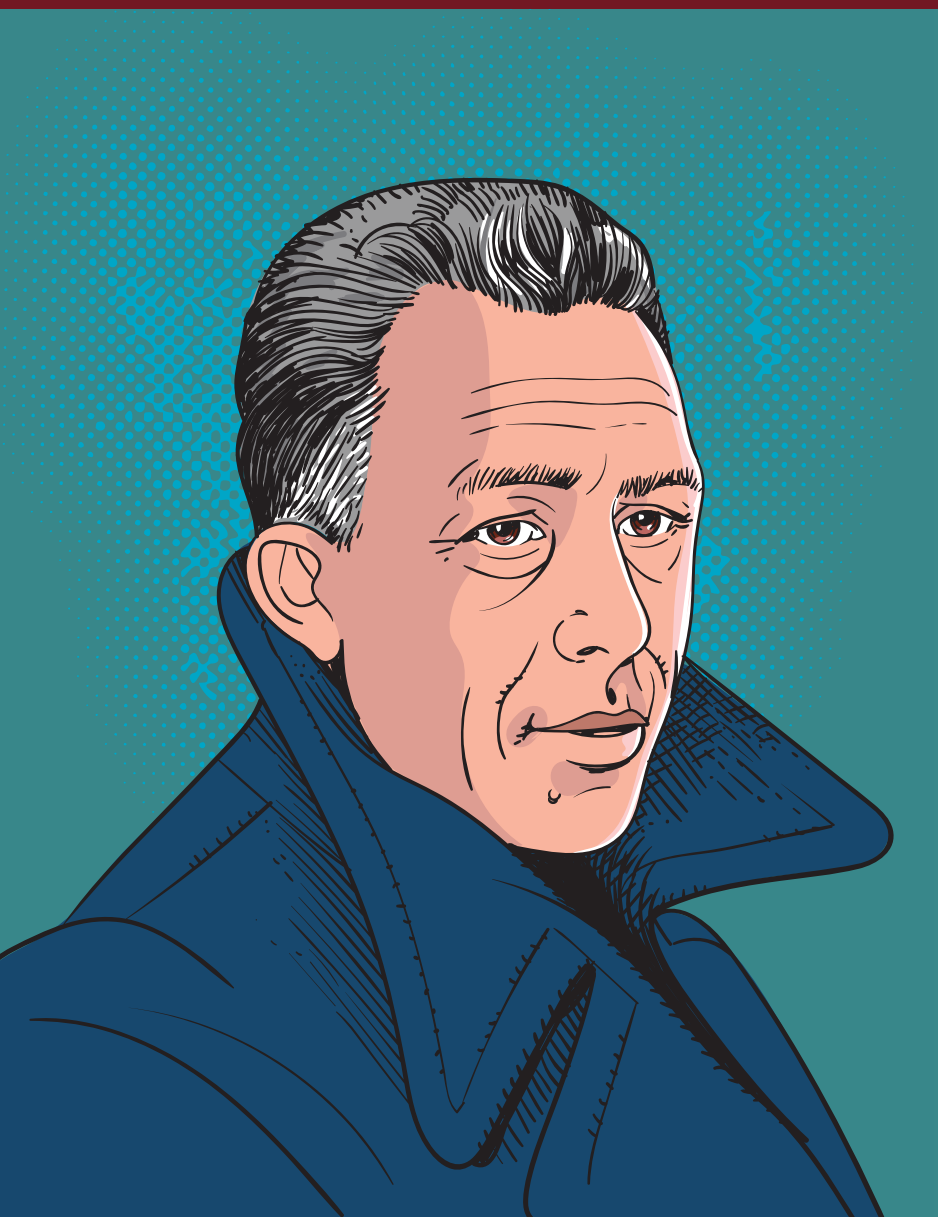




Albert Camus' *The Plague*
The Learning Resource



" the only
means of fighting
a plague is —
common decency "

Albert Camus' *The Plague*

The Learning Resource

2021-09 (Version 1.0)

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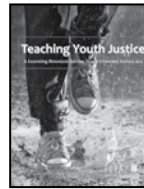
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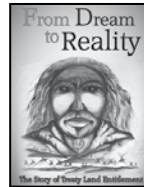
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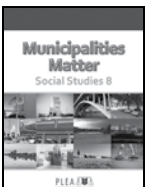
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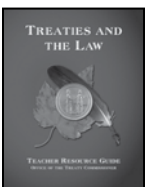
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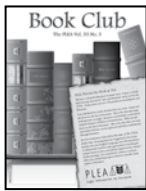
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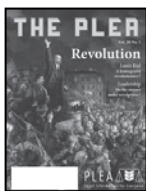
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Introduction



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

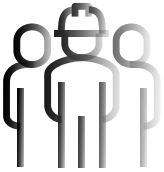
The People of *The Plague*

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.



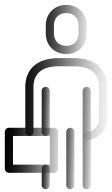
Dr. Bernard Rieux

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.



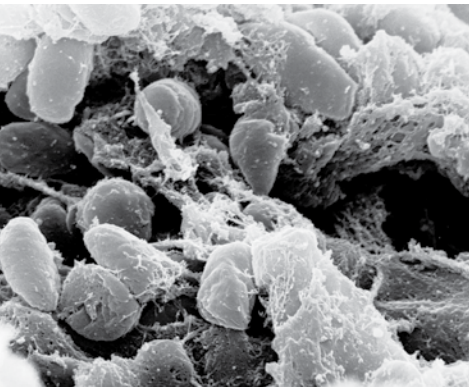
Pre-Reading

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 septicemic 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 **septicemic plague**. It occurs if the bloodstream becomes densely infected with *Y. pestis* bacteria. Like pneumonic plague, septicemic 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.



The Plague: Part One



Part One of *The Plague* recounts the onset of a mysterious disease in the Algerian town of Oran, from its first appearance in rats to the official declaration that plague has arrived.

There are seven stand-alone activities in this section. They will help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.



- **Literary Concepts: The Reliable Narrator and Objectivity** will establish the ideal of objectivity that Camus implanted in the narrator. This activity will be particularly useful for helping students understand the concept of truth, and why the same texts might prompt different responses from different audiences.
- **Think Local: The Police and Suicide** presents one of the many ways society has evolved since *The Plague* was written, as well as opening up considerations of how students can continue this evolution locally.
- **The Philosophy of Camus: Absurdism and Suicide** introduces *The Plague's* philosophical underpinnings in light of Camus' views on truth and life.
- **Historical Context: The End of Democracy in France** establishes the historical context that allegorically framed *The Plague*.
- **Historical Context: Homegrown French Fascism** explains currents in France prior to 1940 that helped allow the authoritarian French Vichy state to form.
- **Literary Concepts: Fables and Human Behaviour** helps connect *The Plague* with other key texts in society, along with introducing some of the ways we use stories to establish society's norms.
- **Literary Concepts: Equality, Empathy, and Freedom of Expression** shows how literary texts can be used to understand our societal norms.



Together, these activities and chapter questions establish broader philosophical and thematic underpinnings of *The Plague*. This will help students use the novel to promote social and personal change.

Depending upon your approach to *The Plague*, most of these are key readings. The ideas raised will be returned to throughout the study of the book.

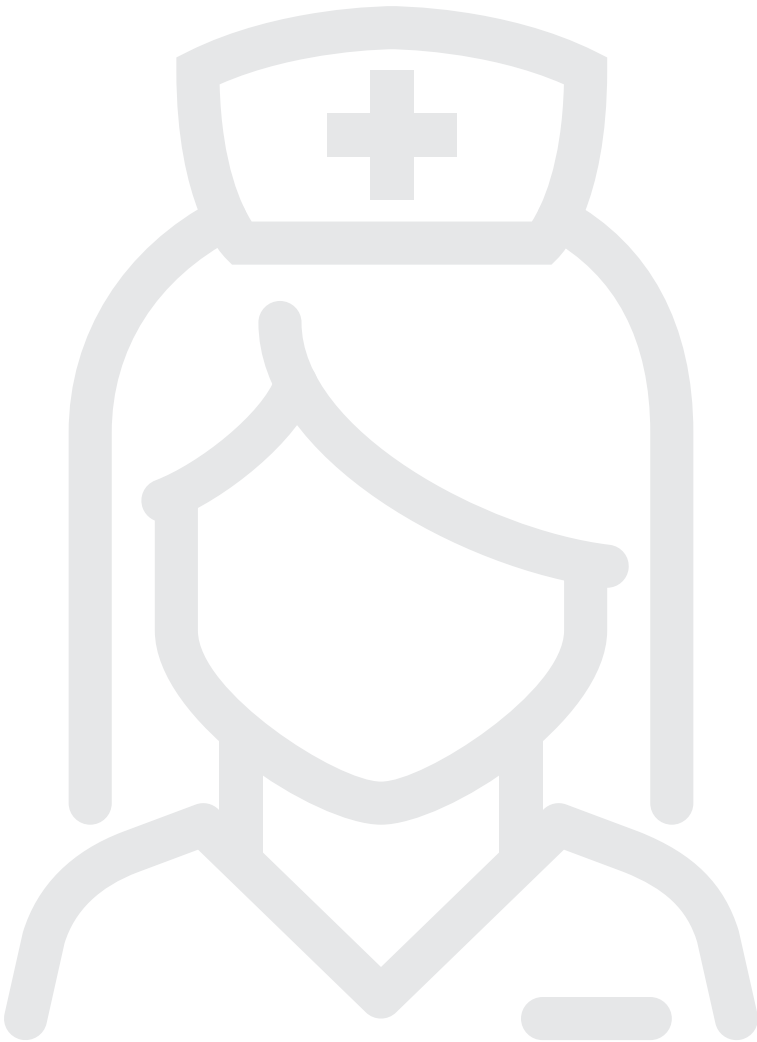
Part One • Chapter 1

// Being ill
is never
agreeable,
but there
are towns
which stand
by you, so
to speak,
when you
are sick //

(6)

The rather bland town of Oran is introduced, alongside the book's narrator. He makes it his business to chronicle the book's events as dispassionately as possible.

1. Why would the story begin in 194-, instead of a more specific year?
2. Describe life and work in Oran. Is it significant that the town is virtually the same as most any place?
3. Why is death particularly difficult in Oran?





Literary Concepts

The Reliable Narrator and Objectivity

In literature, the narrator is the voice or the character who tells the story. Authors put considerable effort into creating this character.

In some stories, the narrator tells the story truthfully. This concept is known as the reliable narrator.

In other stories, the narrator is not entirely truthful with their readers. This concept is known as the unreliable narrator. The unreliable narrator may omit important details, grossly embellish other details, and engage in other deceptive activities. Sometimes, unreliable narrators are purposely dishonest. Other times, unreliable narrators are just making honest mistakes. It all depends on how the author chooses to develop the narrator's character.

In *The Plague*, the narrator is reliable. Even though the narrator declines to reveal who he is—“[his] identity will be made known in due course” (7)—he is not out to deceive the reader. The opening chapter defines *The Plague*'s narrator as someone who will chronicle events as truthfully and dispassionately as possible:

His business is only to say, ‘This is what happened’, when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eye-witnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes. (7)

Put another way, the narrator's business in *The Plague* is to tell us what happened, what is universally relevant, and what can be proven.

Honesty is key for a narrator to be reliable. But more is needed. In order to be reliable, the narrator uses objectivity. Objectivity is the idea that situations, facts, and events can be reported accurately, free from favouritism and subjective judgments.

Understanding Objectivity

To understand objectivity, consider this simple example. Imagine that you placed an apple and a soda cracker on an empty table. It would be objectively true to say that there is one apple and one cracker on the table. We could take our objective truth further, by making certain verifiable statements about the apple and the cracker. For instance, it would be objectively true to say that the apple is sweeter and the cracker is saltier. If we wanted to confirm this as an objective truth, we could use scientific tests that measure the salt and sugar content of the apple and the cracker.

On the other hand, it would be subjective to judge whether the apple tastes better than the cracker. Tastes are a matter of opinion and personal experience. In these matters, everyone will develop their own, unique truth.

This does not mean that it is impossible to find out some broader, objective truths about taste. For instance, you could ask 100 people their taste preference: “What do you prefer? The taste of apples or soda crackers?”

Imagine that 75 people answered that they preferred apples, and 25 answered that they preferred soda crackers. The results of your study could produce another objective truth: “In our survey, 75% of people preferred the taste of apples, 25% preferred the taste of soda crackers.”

Keep in mind that this single, objective truth might not necessarily reflect a universal truth. We cannot be certain that these 100 people are an accurate representation society as a whole. For that matter, our survey does not tell us why these people prefer apples.

All we know for certain is that the 75 of the 100 people asked prefer apples over soda crackers. This is objectively true.

As you can see, objectivity can be possible. But the more complex a situation becomes, the more difficult it is to report it with complete objectivity. This is especially true when issues of taste or value judgments come into play.

There are many reasons why complete objectivity can be difficult to achieve. Let’s consider three reasons.

1. ‘This is what happened’: Limited Information



Still image from the viral Lincoln Memorial confrontation video. What objective truths can be found in this picture? What things remain unknown?

One challenge with achieving objectivity is that we cannot be all-seeing or all-knowing. The information we have is often limited.

Consider, for example, what became known as the 2019 Lincoln Memorial Confrontation. A brief video clip uploaded to social media showed an interaction between teenagers from a Catholic school and a group of Indigenous activists. In the clip, the students appeared to be aggressors who approached an elder.

Viewers reacted with outrage, and the mainstream media was quick to amplify the event. Prominent celebrities and journalists—alongside thousands upon thousands of everyday people—rushed to judgment with this limited information from one brief clip. Many pointed to the “Make America Great Again” hat on the teen at the centre of the video as proof that the teenagers were in the wrong. The hat is a symbol of support for Donald Trump, the divisive American president who ended his single term—according to a Gallup poll—as the most unpopular president in modern American history.

Typical of far too many online interactions, the digital mob’s online frenzy led to death threats and threats of violence against the

students and the school. While women and minorities are most often the targets of online threats of violence, this is a problem that pervades all online interactions.

However, as time went on, more video clips of the event emerged. Some videos showed different angles. Other videos portrayed events that led up to and followed the viral clip. With this new information, the fact set became far more complex. What seemed objectively true in one brief video clip (a group of teenagers surrounding an Indigenous elder) was shown to be a single element of a complex series of events.

Longer clips from different angles showed that the elder approached the teens, the teens did not approach the elder as was widely believed. To be sure though, some of the teens did mock the elder. The elder approached because he hoped to intervene in a situation not seen in the viral clip. The teens were being taunted by a small group of radical religious protesters. The radical religious protesters were hurling rude and homophobic comments. In response, the students were singing school spirit chants to drown them out.

Opinions on the events as a whole remain varied. And nobody can ever know exactly what was going on in the minds of all the people involved. However, the widely-circulated viral clip was only one brief perspective of one moment of a complex situation. It merely provided a single piece of evidence. Thus, the clip demonstrated that it can be difficult—and perhaps even dangerous—to rush to claims of objective truths when we have limited information.

2. ‘This is what happened’: Individual Filters



An inkblot from the Rorschach test. Would a lepidopterist (a person who studies moths and butterflies) be more likely to see a moth or butterfly? If so, what does this tell us about how individual filters shape our perspectives?

Another challenge with achieving objectivity is that we all bring our own unique perspectives, beliefs, and biases to a situation. These factors can create perceptual filters. We can attempt to put our filters aside, but it is not always possible.

Consider, for example, the Rorschach test. This famous psychological test was developed by Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach in the early 20th century. People view inkblot pictures and are asked what they see. Different people looking at the same picture often see something different.

Applications of the Rorschach test and beliefs about its usefulness have evolved over the years. When Rorschach originally developed it, he believed the test would be useful as a perceptual experiment: what we see in each inkblot would reflect our biases, beliefs, and experiences. Because there are many possible answers to each inkblot—and few answers are “wrong”—the Rorschach test demonstrates how we apply our individual filters to what we see.

We sometimes see the same thing differently. This reality may make it more difficult to achieve objectivity.

3. ‘This is what happened’: Too Much Information



Screen grab of CNN broadcasting Donald Trump's empty podium. What perspectives, beliefs, and biases would have led to airing an empty podium?

Unlike the problem of limited information, sometimes we have too much information. This brings us to a third challenge with achieving objectivity. In situations of too much information, choices must be made about what information to include and what information to exclude. Our choices will be influenced—for better or worse—by our perspectives, beliefs, and biases.

Consider, for example, an incident on March 15th, 2016, about halfway through the American presidential primary elections. March 15th was so-called “Super Tuesday II,” a pivotal night in the primary elections. Every American cable news channel was broadcasting live coverage of the evening's events. They also had cameras and reporters on-site at the major campaigns' headquarters.

When Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders took to the stage to deliver his speech, something peculiar happened. No cable news channel aired his speech. Instead, they all cut to live footage of Donald Trump's empty speaking podium.

On the bottom of the cable news channel screens, chyrons (large captions) read “AWAITING TRUMP” and “STANDING BY FOR TRUMP TO SPEAK.” As they waited for Trump, cable hosts and pundits—who had already been on the air for hours—speculated about the election. Their faces periodically appeared, usually in tiny boxes on the side of the screen. Front and centre was Trump's empty podium, bearing a sign advertising the number to text to get involved with his campaign.

The cable networks later justified their decision by saying that they simply had too much analysis from their pundits to fit into the night. In other words, they had too much information to choose from. Consequently, they chose not to air Bernie Sanders' speech. This, however, does not explain their decision to air Trump's empty podium.

We may never know all the reasons why cable news declined to air Bernie Sanders' speech that night, and instead put Donald Trump's empty podium front-and-centre on their screens while pundits engaged in speculative chat. However, the evening's live coverage demonstrates that when faced with too much information, people make decisions about what to include and what to exclude. Their decisions—like all of ours—are filtered by perspectives, beliefs, and biases.

The Reliable Narrator?

As the simple apple and cracker example demonstrates, some things are easy to understand objectively. However, as fact sets become more complex, it becomes more difficult to achieve complete objectivity. We filter what we see, many situations can be considered from different perspectives, and sometimes we have to decide what information to include and what information to exclude.

This is why even reliable narrators cannot always achieve complete objectivity. Even if a narrator believes ‘this is what happened,’ and they are doing their honest best to put aside their own biases and simply report the facts, what they tell us might not be *exactly* what happened.

This does not mean we should suspend our belief in truth and objectivity. This simply means that objectivity is a goal we work towards. In other words, objectivity is an ideal.

Discuss

1. When reporting facts, what is the difference between honest mistakes and purposeful deception? Does the narrator’s intent matter?
2. Literature professor Edwin Moses describes the narrator of *The Plague* as “relatively flat and straight-forward.”¹
 - a) Is it important—especially in times of crisis—to have key facts conveyed without extreme emotions? Is that always possible?
 - b) When are dramatic effects and embellishment useful or appropriate?
3. Think about objectivity as a whole.
 - a) What ways can you assess the objectivity of information?
 - b) What ways can you provide information as objectively as possible?

¹ Edwin Moses. “Functional Complexity: The Narrative Techniques of ‘The Plague’.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol 20, no. 3, Autumn 1974, pp. 419-429. Page 420.

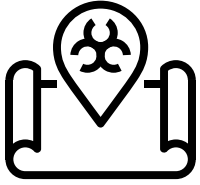
Part One • Chapter 2

For three weeks, dead rats appear in Oran. When the rats stop dying, people begin to contract a mysterious illness.

// Rieux... had
resolved,
for his
part, to
have no
truck with
injustice
and
compromises
with the
truth //

(13)

1. Consider how people make sense of the dying rats.
 - M. Michel thinks that it's "some youngster trying to be funny, most likely" (9). He adds that the rats had "obviously been caught in traps with very strong springs as they were bleeding profusely" (10).
 - The Spaniard believes that "it's hunger, that's what it is, driving them out" (11).
 - Dr. Rieux says that "I can't explain it. It certainly is queer, but it will pass" (11).
 - a) Are Michel or the Spaniard making reasonable assumptions, given the information available?
 - b) Why would Rieux not offer much of an explanation?
2. Why does Rieux's wife leave Oran?
3. Raymond Rambert, a journalist from Paris, appears in Oran.
 - a) Why is he there?
 - b) What concerns does Rieux have with Rambert?
4. The municipality only deals with the dead rats when public pressure grows.
 - a) Is the government's inaction acceptable?
 - b) What should the role of the government be in such situations?
5. Michel is the first person to die. Describe his symptoms.



Think Local

The Police and Suicide

Dr. Rieux responds to a call about a man named Cottard. Cottard attempted suicide, and failed. When *The Plague* was written, attempting suicide was a criminal offence in most countries, including Canada. Because it was a crime, Rieux was obliged to report the attempted suicide to the police.

Today, doctors do not call the police about suicide attempts. In fact, doctors are required to keep almost all interactions with their patients in confidence. However, if a doctor believes the patient will attempt to harm themselves, the patient may be involuntarily admitted to a hospital for observation and treatment. If the patient refuses to be admitted to hospital, the police may be called to intervene.

Police may also find themselves involved with suicide attempts when emergency lines receive calls about people in extreme mental distress. Often, police will be the first responders.

People in a mental health crisis present the police with complex situations. Police are not mental health experts, so these situations are often outside their area of expertise. Consequently, many police departments have created partnerships with mental health agencies. These partnerships help the police better-respond to calls that involve a mental health crisis.

For example, Saskatoon's police have partnered with the Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service and the Saskatchewan Health Authority to create the Police and Crisis Team (PACT). The partnership has led to two-person teams of a police officer and a mental health worker. When police receive a call that they deem is best suited for PACT, PACT can deliver a unique response. The mental health worker brings experience with people suffering from mental health difficulties, and the police officer brings experience in keeping everyone safe.

However, the police are not the only people in the community who respond to such calls. For example, in Saskatoon's Pleasant Hill neighbourhood, there is the Okihtcitâwak Patrol Group. Okihtcitâwak is the Cree word for warrior. This Indigenous-led community organisation helps keep the neighbourhood safe through patrols, removing used needles and picking up litter, and responding to calls for people in states of distress. Regina has a comparable patrol group run by the White Pony Lodge.

Similarly, Saskatoon's downtown, Riversdale, and Broadway districts have community patrol officers. These officers—trained by the Saskatoon Police and partially funded by parking meter revenue—primarily help people in mental health distress or suffering from substance misuse. Only about ten percent of the calls they respond to require intervention by the police or emergency medical services.

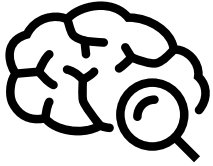
As well, Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service also has a stand-alone response program for people in mental distress.

Programs such as PACT, the Okihtcitâwak Patrol Group, and community patrol officers—alongside other mobile response programs offered by organisations such as The Lighthouse assisted living centre and EGADZ Drop In Centre—help improve everyone's safety. The creation of these programs recognise that while the police and the criminal justice system can sometimes play a role in keeping everyone safe, the

criminal justice system is not always the most appropriate way of dealing with people in mental health crisis. Collaborative and effective crisis intervention programs can help reduce arrests and direct people to needed mental health services.

Discuss

1. Think back to Cottard's attempted suicide in *The Plague*. Were there any reasons to involve the police?
2. Are the police always the most appropriate people to respond when somebody is in mental distress?
3. How do community programs and partnerships between the police and social service providers help create healthier, safer communities? Should we invest more resources into such programs?
4. Can you think of other partnerships that would improve police responses to calls about people in distress? How would your ideas improve society?



The Philosophy of Camus

Absurdism and Suicide

In Part One of *The Plague*, Cottard 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. (3)

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 his life an absurd task.

If our lives are like the life of Sisyphus—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. (65)



Sisyphus rolls a boulder up a hill. His scheme to cheat death makes him a trickster-type character.

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" (123). If the search for truth drives our existence, we should choose to make it a happy struggle.

Discuss

1. 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?
2. Cultural critic Neil Postman believed that we can become better people by understanding that sometimes, there is no single truth. He said:

To be able to hold comfortably in one's mind the validity and usefulness of two contradictory truths is the source of tolerance, openness, and, most important, a sense of humor, which is the greatest enemy of fanaticism.²

How does an ability to see multiple truths make us more tolerant and open?

3. English philosopher G.K. Chesterton touched on the risks of life without a firm belief system. He is widely-quoted as having said:

When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing in anything.*

Can a willingness to believe in anything be a good thing? Can it be a bad thing? Where do we draw the line?

4. Is it significant that a character fails in his attempt to commit suicide near the beginning of *The Plague*? If so, why?

* Often, this quote is attributed to Chesterton. He never said it. Belgian playwright Émile Cammaerts said something similar when describing Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories. In *The Laughing Prophet*, Cammaerts said "the first effect of not believing in god is to believe in anything."²

¹ Neil Postman. *The End of Education*, Vintage Books, 1996, p. 11.

² Émile Cammaerts. *The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton*. Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1937, p. 211.

Part One • Chapter 3

// all these
rats meant
trouble
coming //

(25)

Jean Tarrou, a vacationer, happens to be in Oran when the plague strikes. In his notebook, Tarrou chronicles small, peculiar events and looks for ways to make sense of them.

1. How do the tram conductors explain their colleague's death?
2. Tarrou tells the night porter at the hotel that "the only thing I'm interested in... is acquiring peace of mind" (25).
 - a) What does it mean to acquire peace of mind?
 - b) How does Tarrou's desire to acquire peace of mind relate to Camus' beliefs about absurdism?

3. Tarrou and the hotel manager discuss dead rats appearing in a three-star hotel:

To console him I said, "But you know, everybody's in the same boat."

"That's just it," he replied. "Now we're like everybody else." (26).

Why would a luxury hotel manager be upset to be "like everybody else"?

4. 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.
 - a) Why did the hotel manager call Tarrou a fatalist? How did he respond?
 - b) Look at how Tarrou chronicles Oran in this chapter. Would you consider him a fatalist?
5. Think more deeply about Tarrou's forceful rejection of the label "fatalist."
 - a) Why do we label people?
 - b) Are labels sometimes useful?
 - c) What are the risks of blindly categorising others with labels?

Part One • Chapter 4

// 'Vanished?'
What does
that word
really
mean? //

(33)

Doctors begin to see patients with a mysterious illness. Rieux worries about how bad the outbreak will be. Meanwhile, Cottard attributes his attempted suicide to a secret grief.

1. Rieux asks the medical association chairman to put new cases in isolation. The chairman says he cannot order that: he can only put the idea to the local governor, called a Prefect.
 - a) Governing authorities follow a chain of command. This helps ensure order. What could happen if the chairman ignored the chain of command?
 - b) Are there times when a chain of command should be ignored?
2. When people begin to die, “the local Press, so lavish of news about rats, now had nothing to say. For rats die in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the streets” (32).
 - a) Do you agree? Is traditional media such as newspapers or cable news only concerned with what happens on “the streets”?
 - b) Has social media blurred the lines between public and private life? If so, how?
3. Rieux discusses the disease with Castel, an older, well-travelled doctor. Rieux is hesitant to say that the disease is plague without the test results. Castel says “Come now, Rieux, you know as well as I do what it is” (32). Rieux immediately agrees.
 - a) Why would Rieux so quickly agree with Castel?
 - b) What does Rieux’s quick agreement tell us about the importance of elder knowledge?
4. Speaking about Part One Chapter 4, literature professor Eric Deudon, who had previously attended medical school, said:

At this stage, it is no longer credible that the town’s physicians cannot identify the disease. Sporadic instances of plague were not particularly unusual on the northern coast of Africa. Furthermore, the link between the thousands of decomposing rats lining up the streets of Oran, and the symptoms of a disease which has already killed more than 20 people is just too obvious to be missed, even by the most careless practitioner.¹

Deudon believes that every doctor in town should now have been certain the disease was plague.

- a) Why would Camus portray most of the doctors as oblivious to what was happening?
- b) Is fiction always an accurate representation of reality?

¹ Eric H. Deudon. "A Case for Literary Malpractice: The Use of Camus's *The Plague* in American Medical Schools," *The Linacre Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, 1988, p. 75.



Historical Context

The End of Democracy in France

An allegory is a story with a second meaning. *The Plague* is considered an allegory. On the surface, Camus wrote about a disease sweeping through Oran. Below the surface, Camus wrote about the infestation of France with Nazis and their collaborators during World War II.

Even the title of the book drops a hint about its allegory. 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 their brown uniforms.

La peste brune, the Nazi infestation of France, began in mid-1940. On May 9th, Germany marched into the Netherlands and Belgium, en route to France. Their journey didn't take long. By June 14th, Hitler's armies were in Paris. On June 22nd, after several days of political wrangling, France's leaders accepted defeat and signed an armistice agreement with Germany.

France following the 1940 Armistice. The south was fully administered by the Vichy government and the north remained French territory under German military occupation. The border is called the Demarcation Line. The border was annulled shortly after Germany took military control of all of France in November 1942.



Under the agreement, all of France would continue to be governed by the French, at least on paper. However, the German military would occupy the north, known as *Zone Occupée*. In *Zone Occupée*, French rule was subject to intense German military oversight. The south of France, known as *Zone libre*, would be under full French control. France was allowed to keep a small military force in the south. France's holdings in North Africa—Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco—also remained in French hands. Algeria had been integrated into France in 1848, while Tunisia and Morocco were ruled by local monarchs under the thumb of French generals. As well, a small southern corner of France was taken over by Italy.

Officially defeated, France's lawmakers then did something extraordinary. Leading politicians said that France needed a new constitution, despite the armistice agreement requiring no such thing. On July 10th, a vote was held by France's Chamber of Deputies and Senate on whether or not they should dissolve the democratic French Third Republic.

Voting to Destroy Democracy

The vote that destroyed the Third Republic wasn't even close. 569 legislators voted in favour of the proposal, 80 voted against. That said, 176 were absent: some were on a boat to North Africa with hopes of setting up a government-in-exile, a few were in jail, and some were in France but never showed up. However, even when absentees are factored in, almost 70% of France's legislators voted to end the Third Republic.

This landslide vote in favour of destroying a democracy has confounded people ever since. It could be argued that France's democratic self-destruction was a betrayal committed by France's political elite, who were seeking authoritarian power and closer ties with Nazi Germany. However, historians have pointed out that the move was widely supported by the French public, tired of years of political gridlock and shocked by the country's sudden military defeat. As Historian Robert O. Paxton argues, France's democratic suicide was "no revolution from above. It reflected almost unanimous French public opinion."

Another disturbing aspect of the destruction of French democracy is captured by legal scholar Vivian Grosswald Curran. She points out that democracy was destroyed in France through legal and democratic means. As she put it,

France's Parliament by an overwhelming majority of 569 out of 649 legislators, committed institutional suicide by voting itself out of existence and creating a dictatorship, all in careful compliance with the French Third Republic's legal procedure.²

In other words, people used democracy to destroy democracy. Not everyone agrees with Curran's analysis. Nonetheless, the simple fact that over two-thirds of France's legislators voted in favour of destroying one of the world's most-established liberal democracies—with wide public support—should give us all reason for pause.



A Vichy poster shows the Third Republic crumbling under democratic foundations, singling out parliament, Jews, and internationalism amongst others. Meanwhile France of the *Révolution nationale* firmly sits on authoritarian foundations.

Vichy: The Authoritarian French State

There is little to admire about what replaced the French Third Republic. The new French State created shortly after the vote is commonly called Vichy France. Vichy is the name of the central French town where the new government was headquartered.

Philippe Pétain was appointed Vichy France's head of state. Pétain was a popular and elderly war hero, who had helped lead France to victory against Germany in World War I. He was given full power to create a new constitution for the country.

Pétain and his cabinet were hostile to the ideas of democracy and liberalism. They blamed liberal ideals for weakening people and leading to France's military defeat. His new French constitution embraced far-right authoritarianism. The national motto was changed from *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) to *Travail, Famille, Patrie* (Work, Family, Homeland). This program of reform was called *Révolution nationale*.

Révolution nationale was an enormous setback for human rights. Personal and political freedoms were taken away, the economy came under tight control, the media lost most of its independence, and new laws targeted Jews. In these regards, Vichy France began to look a lot like Nazi Germany. And the government often collaborated with Nazi Germany.

As terrible as these changes were, Pétain and his government held on to wide public support in the early days. In addition to the common belief that the Third Republic had provided ineffectual government throughout the 1930s, many people also believed that Germany was going to win the war, so they may as well get on board with the coming European order.

Resistance

Of course, not everyone supported Vichy. An underground opposition movement called the French Resistance formed. Resisters came from all ages, social classes, backgrounds, and beliefs. Historians have struggled to determine the number of people actively involved in the resistance: estimates range from 2% to 20% of the population.

It is impossible to singularly define the beliefs and ideals of the people engaged in resistance. However, they all shared a common goal: resisting the injustices of Naziism and the *Révolution nationale*. Some were resisters with a lowercase r. Others were Resisters with a capital R.

Lowercase r resisters performed isolated acts of defiance. Their acts of resistance could be as simple as raising a French tricolour flag on a building, or helping a person hide from Vichy police. These resisters never affiliated themselves with a particular group.

Capital R Resisters were part of actively engaged fighting groups. These groups formed underground, plotting against Nazis and their Vichy collaborators. Ronald Rosbottom has described them as not an army, but "a group of young people who just got together here and there, and in effect created their own tactics." They had no central organising mechanism, at least in the early days. Rosbottom added that "It began from the ground up, which is what's remarkable.... Courage was suddenly needed."³

Albert Camus, as we will find out, was amongst the Resisters.

Discuss

1. Vichy France was created through democratic, constitutional means. Why must we vigilantly guard our democracies from dictators and other authoritarians?
2. In *The Plague*, think more about the sense of denial—even by some doctors—as plague hits Oran. How would a sense of denial allow a disease to grow?

¹ Robert O. Paxton. *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. Alfred A Knopf, 1972, p. 30.

² Vivian Grosswald Curran. “The Legalization of Racism in a Constitutional State: Democracy’s Suicide in Vichy France,” *Hastings Law Journal*, vol. 50, 1998, p. 4.

³ quoted in Rich Tenorio. “Teenagers helped launch the WWII French Resistance; many paid with their lives.” *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2020. www.timesofisrael.com/teenagers-helped-launch-the-wwii-french-resistance-many-paid-with-their-lives/



Historical Context

Homegrown French Fascism

The Nazis did not introduce illiberalism, authoritarianism, or fascism to France. These ideas had been simmering in the country for years. In *The Plague*, Camus makes this point through allegory:

“Yes, Castel,” [Rieux] replied. “It’s hardly credible. But everything points to it being plague.”

Castel got up and began walking towards the door.

“You know,” the old doctor said, “what they’re going to tell us? That it vanished from the temperate countries long ago.”

““Vanished?”” What does that word really mean?” Rieux shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes. And don’t forget. Just under twenty years ago, in Paris too....”

“Right. Let’s hope it won’t prove any worse this time than it did then. But really it’s... incredible.” (33)

Taken literally, this passage is a historically-accurate reference to plague. There were several small outbreaks of plague in Paris during the 1920s. The worst years, 1920 and 1921, saw an estimated 95 cases and between 33 and 39 deaths. From 1922 to 1934, another 45 cases appeared in Paris along with smaller outbreaks across France.

Taken allegorically, this passage can be considered a reference to French fascism. Following World War I, France experienced an outbreak of fascist political groups. Their extreme views dogged France in the 1920s and 1930s, a time known as the interwar years.

Who Were the French Fascists?

Fascism is an extreme right-wing political ideology. Interwar fascism was characterised by such things as hyper-nationalism, a hate for outsiders and minorities, authoritarian rule, the collapse of democracy and the rule of law, a glorification of violence, and a drive towards war. The fascist goal is to overturn the existing order and create a new, “purified” nation and society.

Germany’s Adolf Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini probably are the two most recognisable fascist leaders of the interwar era. However, fascists could be found almost everywhere following World War I, including Canada.

In France, extreme-right and outrightly fascist political groups that emerged in this time included *Le Faisceau* (The Fascists, 1925), *Redressement Français* (French Resurgence, 1926), and *Croix-de-Feu* (Cross of Fire, 1927). No one organisation was exactly like the others. But in general, they shared ideals such as:

- replacing parliament with a king or dictator

- combining the power of the state with the power of corporations
- romanticising the role of the homeland and the peasant class
- adhering to strict Catholic religious values
- demonising immigrants, minorities, and left-wing politicians

Average French citizens were not immune to these ideas. As one indication of their popularity, *Croix-de-Feu*, a paramilitary organisation, had almost half a million members by the mid-1930s.



The symbol of *Croix-de-Feu*. Debate continues on whether they were simply authoritarian or all-out fascist. Historian Robert Paxton says “if [they] were fascist, fascism was powerful in 1930s France; if they were not, fascism was limited to the margins.”



Rioters face off against police in Paris, February 6th, 1934.

Conflicts about extreme political values sometimes spilled into the streets. Riots between the political left and the political right were common. The fighting contributed to a growing frustration with France’s democracy. It also further drove political polarisation: quite often, extremism begets extremism.

The French fascist and extreme-right movements that broke out in the 1920s seemingly reached a peak on February 6th, 1934. That evening, several of these groups protested in the streets. They all converged on Place de la Concorde, the square across from France’s house of parliament. Many protesters wanted to storm the chamber and replace the government with a fascist dictatorship, similar to the governments of Hitler or Mussolini. Fortunately, the groups lacked central planning. The police were given orders to fight back, and 15 demonstrators and one police officer were killed.

One consequence of the riots was that it sparked France’s left-wing political groups to put aside their differences and unite against extremists. They formed an umbrella group called *Front Populaire* (Popular Front) and went on to win France’s 1936 election.

Front Populaire’s electoral victory did not spell the end for fascism in France. But it did keep the fascists away from the levers of political power. France’s new government set to work building up social programs, enhancing worker rights, and further preparing France’s defences for a possible German invasion. As well, they kept an election promise to ban extremist right-wing leagues such as *Croix-de-Feu*.

Thus, when Dr. Rieux hopes that the plague “won’t prove any worse this time than it did then,” it can be considered an allegorical reference to fascists and the far right. In 1920s France, far-right movements began to bubble up. However, they failed to get into power in the 1930s.

Unfortunately, the extreme right never completely lost their appeal. We will never know the extent of their electoral appeal, because Germany’s invasion of France halted the 1940 election. When France fell, extremists used the crisis of a military defeat to argue that the democratic French Third Republic had failed. The majority of legislators agreed. Backed by French public opinion, a far-right, authoritarian, and perhaps fascist regime was created: Vichy France.

Discuss

1. Reconsider the following passage from *The Plague*:

“You know,” the old doctor said, “what they’re going to tell us? That it vanished from the temperate countries long ago.”

“Vanished?” What does that word really mean?” Rieux shrugged.

Look up the word vanished. What does that word really mean?

2. When France banned the *Croix-de-Feu*, its leader created the *Parti Social Français*. According to historian Robert Soucy, its leader “simply changed the name of his movement and claimed that it was now thoroughly democratic.”¹
 - a) Can an idea truly be destroyed by banning it?
 - b) If banning an idea cannot destroy it, what does the banishment accomplish?
3. Is there a single, easily-found solution to dangerous diseases? Is there a single, easily-found solution to dangerous ideas?

¹ Robert O. Paxton. *The Anatomy of Fascism*. Vintage Books, 2005, p. 70.

² Robert Soucy. *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*. Yale University Press, 1995, p. 112.

Part One • Chapter 5

// They fancied
themselves
free, and
no one will
ever be free
so long as
there are
pestilences. //

(34)

Rieux begins to fully accept that plague is descending upon Oran.

1. Rieux compares plague to war.

Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise. (34)

- a) Did the onset of COVID-19 take you by surprise?
 - b) Do you ever consider the possibility of war?
 - c) What control do average people have over the outbreaks of epidemics or wars?
2. The chapter closes with the words “The thing was to do your job as it should be done” (37).
 - a) How are these words relevant to a doctor facing a plague?
 - b) How do these words apply to each of us in a time of crisis?



Part One • Chapter 6

// this was
the real
trouble
Joseph
Grand
couldn't
find his
words //

(41)

Joseph Grand is often unable to articulate his thoughts. This is a reason why he has been trapped in an entry-level job at the municipal office for 22 years.

1. The escaped slave and social reformer Frederick Douglass said “Power concedes nothing without a demand.” How do these words apply to everyday situations like Grand’s employment situation?
2. Grand is said to be civic-minded, and kind to people around him.
 - a) Why are these good qualities?
 - b) Is it necessary to achieve “greatness” to be great?
3. Early in his adult life, Camus planned to be a civil servant and write in his spare time. What does this tell us about how authors create characters?



Part One • Chapter 7

// we should not
act as if
there were no
likelihood
that
half the
population
wouldn't be
wiped out;
for then it
would be //

(46)

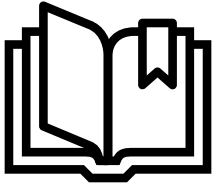
A health committee meets at the Prefect's office. Rieux wants prompt action, but Dr. Richard is reluctant to act without conclusive lab results.

1. The Prefect believes the panic over plague is overdone. He says "Take prompt action if you like, but don't attract attention" (43).
 - a) Why would the Prefect not want to attract attention to the situation?
 - b) What are the risks of overreacting? What are the risks of under-reacting?
2. Describing the difficulties facing governments during COVID-19, a British Member of Parliament said
Politicians have to make decisions on the information that is available. And by the time they've got perfect information it is too late to make the decision.¹

Discuss this statement in the context of the events of this chapter.



¹ Jacob Rees-Mogg. *The Moggcast*, November 2, 2020, 8:48.



Literary Concepts

Fables and Human Behaviour

A fable is a short story with a moral lesson. It tells us how humans behave or how humans *ought* to behave. Fables and similar folklore are passed along to entertain. However, they are also passed along to infuse people with ideals. These ideals form the norms and expectations of their society.

For example, think of the Chicken Little fable. We've all heard a version or two of this story: an acorn (or something similar) falls on Chicken Little's head. Chicken Little concludes that "the sky is falling." All the birds blindly accept Chicken Little's version of events, and mass hysteria ensues. The only animal not to believe Chicken Little is the fox. He lures the birds into his den for their "safety," and he then eats them. The lesson? It is dangerous to jump to conclusions without verifying the facts.



An illustration from the story "Chicken Little" in the New Barnes Reader vol.1, New York, 1916.

Some Chicken Little-type ideas come into play in *The Plague*, when the medical committee discusses what to do about the illness descending upon Oran. Consider how nobody wants to declare that plague has arrived:

- the Prefect is convinced the situation is a false alarm, and believes the doctors should "take prompt action if you like, but don't attract attention" (43).
- Dr. Castel is certain the disease is plague, but is okay with denying it. He feels that the authorities are not willing to take the drastic steps necessary if the proclamation is made.
- Dr. Richard thinks it would be unwise to declare a plague until the facts are known with absolute certainty.
- Dr. Rieux says that the evidence points towards a contagious, plague-like disease. Nobody knows with certainty if it is plague, but the available evidence makes him confident that something is wrong. Rieux concludes that the municipality's laws for dealing with plague should be put into force, even if the disease is not yet declared to be plague.

In a Chicken Little sense, declaring that plague has hit Oran would be similar to declaring that "the sky is falling": the facts are not yet all in place.

Nevertheless, things are not looking good. The people in the meeting are facing a complicated balance of knowns and unknowns. Given the situation, Dr. Rieux appears to have the most sound approach: do not declare that the sky is falling, but take precautions based on what is known.

Are Laws like Fables?

In some ways, laws are like fables. Laws and fables define society's norms and expectations. Laws and fables also spell out consequences for violating these norms.

Discuss

1. Nobody at the meeting wants to risk being Chicken Little and outrightly say that plague has arrived in Oran.
 - a) Could a proclamation of plague lead to mass hysteria?
 - b) What would happen if the authorities declared there was a plague, but were later proven wrong when the lab tests came back?
2. Consider Dr. Rieux's approach to how Oran should deal with this mysterious illness.
 - a) Should authorities be forthright about what they know and what they don't know?
 - b) Does acknowledging unknowns create fear? Or can honesty instill confidence in leaders?
3. Is panic self-perpetuating? In other words, does seeing people panic make other people panic?
4. Look up other fables, folklore, and traditional knowledge, such as the Aesop fable "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," the Greek myth of Cassandra, or the Mi'kmaq legend "How Rabbit Got His Long Ears."
 - a) What is the moral of the story?
 - b) How does the story relate to the events of this chapter of *The Plague*?
 - c) Can you relate the story's lessons to current events?
5. Think more about the stories you looked up for question 4. Do they contain similar lessons? If so, does this suggest that there are some universal beliefs across societies?

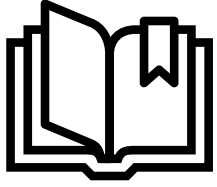
Part One • Chapter 8

// The local population, who so far had made a point of masking their anxiety by facetious comments, now seemed tongue-tied and went their ways with gloomy faces. //

(55)

The municipality declares that plague has come, and orders Oran to be shut down.

1. The day after the medical committee meeting, small official notices are posted in obscure places.
 - a) Outline the precautions listed on the notice.
 - b) Is there anything about the notice or the way the municipality posts it that sticks out to you?
2. Rieux and Castel await a serum, but are unsure if it will work.
 - a) Is there a chance that the bacteria will mutate from its previous forms?
 - b) How could this situation apply to *The Plague's* allegory of fascism's spread in France?
3. Cottard tells Rieux "I was thinking of people who take an interest in you to only make trouble for you." (51)
 - a) Is Rieux taking an interest in Cottard to make trouble for him?
 - b) Is this phenomena—people taking interest in you only to make trouble—a particular problem in the age of social media?
 - c) If you put your life on display on social media, is it to be expected that people will take an interest in you, for better and for worse?
4. Rieux tells Cottard "What's important is for you to go out a bit. It's a mistake staying indoors too much" (52).
 - a) Is this good advice? Why or why not?
 - b) Do we spend too much time interacting online and not enough time interacting in person?
 - c) Does online interaction give us a full understanding of people and humanity?
5. Rieux receives a telegram from the Prefect. It reads "*Proclaim a state of plague Stop close the town*" (56).
 - a) Should more have been done earlier?
 - b) If so, is any one person in Oran to blame?
 - c) Is focussing on blame in this situation productive? How can we balance the need to learn from past mistakes with the need to look forward to find solutions?



Literary Concepts

Equality, Empathy, and Freedom of Expression

Cottard views authors highly. He tells Grand, who is writing a novel, that “An author has more rights than ordinary folk, as everybody knows. People will stand much more from him” (50). Nobody has more rights than anybody else in a liberal democracy. Yet, there may be some truth to Cottard’s statement.

One purpose of the arts is to help us build empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand other people’s experiences and share their feelings. When we learn about the experiences of others, we have the opportunity to get inside their world. Because the experiences of others are not always happy, building empathy sometimes requires us to become uncomfortable.

In order to make us uncomfortable, we generally give authors and other artists the leeway to push boundaries. There is no hard and fast rule about who is an “artist” and thus has a social license to push boundaries. Nor is there a hard and fast rule about what boundaries can be pushed. As art and education professor Elliott Eisner says, “Validity in the arts is the product of the persuasiveness of a personal vision.” If an artist’s work is persuasive enough, people will stand much more from that artist than they generally would stand from the average person.

To understand how this boundary-pushing works, consider Mel Brooks and his western film parody *Blazing Saddles*. Mel Brooks is widely lauded as a great filmmaker and humourist, and *Blazing Saddles* has been universally acclaimed as one of the funniest movies ever made.

One intent of *Blazing Saddles* was to use comedy to expose the folly of racism and discrimination, both in the time and place the film was set (the American west of 1874), and in the film’s contemporary context (The United States of 1974). *Stereogum* senior editor Tom Breihan succinctly recounts its plot for the pop culture site The A.V. Club:

Blazing Saddles is, in effect, a knowingly absurd comedy about how dumb racism is. A rapacious rich guy wants to run all the people out of a small town because the land’s about to be worth a lot of money, so he sends in a Black sheriff, knowing that the town’s residents will be too blinded by their own racism to look after their self-interests.²



Gene Wilder (right) puts his arm around the shoulder of Cleavon Little in a still from *Blazing Saddles*.

At times, the film used boundary-pushing language and humour that appears, on its face, to be racist. However, people understood that Mel Brooks was not using these scenes to be racist. Rather, Brooks—along with his co-writers such as stand-up comedian Richard Pryor—were using *Blazing Saddles* to reject racism. As film critic Neil Sinyard points out, the movie “assaults the western [movie]’s notion of ethnic purity” and “shows the deformity of...white supremacy.”³

The approach to racism in *Blazing Saddles* is well-summarised by Jacqueline Stewart, the cinema studies professor and director of the nonprofit arts organisation Black Cinema House. She says in her introduction to the movie’s HBO Max stream that “racist language and attitudes pervade the film. But those attitudes are espoused by characters who are explicitly portrayed here as narrow-minded, ignorant bigots.”⁴ One scene in particular calls the racist townsfolk what they are: morons.

In fact, *Blazing Saddles*’ civil-rights theme was a reason why the United States’ Library of Congress placed the movie on the prestigious Film Preservation List in 2006. In choosing the film, they recognised its “importance to American movie and cultural history, and to history in general.”⁵ It is widely agreed that the intent and the outcome of *Blazing Saddles* was to help society understand the wrongs of racism, by exposing racists as narrow-minded, ignorant bigots, deserving of ridicule.

The *Blazing Saddles* example illustrates Cottard’s point that “an author has more rights than ordinary folk, as everybody knows. People will stand much more from him.” There is a profound difference between a respected filmmaker using racist tropes to illustrate the folly of racism, and somebody’s neighbour wilfully spouting off racist statements on Facebook to be “funny.” In these situations, intent matters. Mel Brooks was building empathy and compassion; the neighbour may very well be promoting hate. This is why a decent society generally will accept Brooks’ movie, understanding how it both reflected and deeply challenged the values of its time, but at the same time a decent society will reject the neighbour’s racism.

The broader idea underlying this example—that people should be free to express ideas but not free to promote hate—is a key tenet of a liberal society.

Liberalism and Freedom of Expression

The word liberal comes from the Latin word *liber*. Liber is the adjective that means free. Thus, a core idea of liberal societies is the right of individuals to their freedoms.

Canada is a liberal democracy. Many of our freedoms are enshrined in the country’s highest law, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The *Charter*, which forms part of our constitution, guarantees Canadians the following fundamental freedoms:

- freedom of conscience and religion
- freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication
- freedom of peaceful assembly
- freedom of association

Canadians are free to believe things, free to say things, free to organise groups, and free to try to change people’s minds.

However, unlike many countries Canada takes a unique and thoughtful approach to our freedoms. The *Charter* says that “reasonable limits” can be placed on freedoms.



The Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* became law in 1982.

A freedom may be limited if to do so is demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society. This is how we balance the rights of individuals to do what they please with the needs for broader societal order. The idea of “reasonable limits” means that your neighbour is not free to wilfully promote racism. Our laws recognise that vilifying minorities is wrong and can cause harm, thus trampling the rights and freedom of minorities. Hence, it is a reasonable limit in a free and democratic society to disallow hate speech.

Discuss

1. Camus wrote in *The Rebel* that “absolute freedom is the right of the strongest to dominate” (251). How could absolute freedom harm the weakest or most vulnerable people in society?
2. Canada is somewhat unique in that our constitution allows reasonable limits to be placed on freedom of expression, so long as those constraints can be democratically justified. The United States constitution, by contrast, places less constraints on expression. This has led to some outrageous acts in the United States. For example, while Canadians generally cannot display Nazi flags if they are being used to communicate hate, Americans generally are free to fly Nazi flags.

What kinds of limits should a free and democratic society put on freedom of expression?

3. In Vichy France, speech was tightly regulated. There were things that writers were told they could not say. On the flip side, there also were things that writers were told they should say.

For example, look at the government requirements for journalists describing Vichy’s leader, Philippe Pétain:

In referring to the Head of State the expression ‘old gentlemen’ must be avoided, even when preceded by a well-disposed adjective like ‘illustrious’ or ‘valiant.’ Terms which evoke his military past such as ‘illustrious warrior’ or ‘valiant soldier’ should be used as little as possible... On the other hand, frequent mention should be made of the Marshal’s moral and physical vigour, his generous disposition, his lucidity, and the interest he takes in every problem.⁶

Are there circumstances where it is acceptable to compel people to say things that they don’t believe?

- ¹ Elliot W. Eisner. "On the Differences Between Scientific and Artistic Approaches to Qualitative Research." *Review of Research in Visual Arts Education*, vol. 7, no. 1, Winter 1981, pp. 1-8, page 2.
- ² Tom Breihan. "Blazing Saddles punched up—knocking out horses and a racist America in one swing." *The A.V. Club*, November 1, 2019. <https://film.avclub.com/blazing-saddles-punched-up-knocking-out-horses-and-a-ra-1839370209>
- ³ Neil Sinyard. *The Films of Mel Brooks*. Bison Books, 1987, p. 35.
- ⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5mVQh4TzI4 , 1:38
- ⁵ "Librarian of Congress Adds Home Movie, Silent Films and Hollywood Classics to Film Preservation List." *Library of Congress*, 27 December 2006 www.loc.gov/item/prn-06-234/films-added-to-national-film-registry-for-2006/2006-12-27/
- ⁶ Nicholas Matthews. "Collaboration, Resistance, and State-Sanctioned Journalism in Vichy France" *Aleph*, 26 July 2015. <http://aleph.humanities.ucla.edu/2015/07/26/collaboration-resistance-and-state-sanctioned-journalism-in-vichy-france/>



The Plague: Part Two



Part Two of *The Plague* recounts how plague begins to impact the lives of people in Oran. The crisis requires people to consider their role in society.

There are six stand-alone activities in this section that can help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.



- **The Philosophy of Camus: Justice, Not Hatred** asks students to consider what is justice, and start building their own idea of justice.
- **Health Concepts: Plague and Excess Mortality** continues with the ideas about objectivity and truth by opening up considerations of using singular statistics as holistic explanations.
- **Historical Context: The “Vaunted Might” of Science** establishes the historical basis of the scientific method and considers some of its conflicts with other forms of truth.
- **Think Local: Political Protest** examines ways for students to create change by opening up considerations of the concepts of resistance and rebellion.
- **Historical Context: Outlawing Science in Camus' Time** continues building on the historical and political context of *The Plague*, while also deepening student concepts of truth.
- **Health Concepts: Absolute Freedom and Universal Health Care** asks students to consider ideas of freedom and consider how we build the common good by limiting the ability of the strongest to dominate.



Together, these activities and the chapter questions build upon the philosophical and thematic underpinnings of *The Plague* introduced in Part One of this resource.

Part Two • Chapter 1

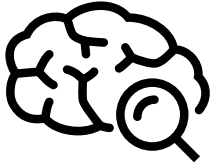
// From now on
it can be
said that
plague was
the concern
of all of
us //

(57)

The early days of Oran's lockdown are discussed, and broadly compared to the idea of imprisonment.

1. Review how communication in and out of Oran was halted. (57-59)
 - a) Were people able to get messages to friends and loved ones outside the community?
 - b) How have technological advancements improved our ability to communicate?
 - c) On the whole, have advancements in communication been a good or a bad thing? Or is there good and bad in most everything?
2. The lockdown trapped people inside Oran. However, locked-out residents could return if they wished.
 - a) Why would someone return to Oran?
 - b) Did anyone actually return to Oran?
3. Describe the emotional experience for people trapped in Oran? How does it compare to lockdowns experienced due to COVID-19?





The Philosophy of Camus

Justice, Not Hatred

Oran's lockdown is compared to prison. Citizens are called "the prisoners of the plague" (64) and going home is to return "to our prison-house" (61). In a direct reference to the justice system, the narrator says "We were much like those whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars" (62).

This was not the first time Camus connected hatred to justice. An almost identical passage appeared in an early draft chapter of *The Plague*. The chapter, called "Exiles of the Plague," was included in the 1943 book *Domaine Français*, a collection of works written by French Resisters. Because of censorship in Vichy France, the chapters of this book were smuggled out of France and printed in Switzerland.

Seeing that Camus' comparisons between hatred and justice survived from an early draft of *The Plague* and made it into the final version of the novel, the concept was important to him. Thus, we should think more about the links between hatred and justice.

What is Justice?

For as long as people have lived together, we have tried to determine what is "justice." There is no single answer. Justice is a complicated concept.

To help understand what we mean when we say justice, we can start by looking at the Oxford English Dictionary. They define justice as:

Maintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment; giving of due desserts.

This definition raises many questions about the concept of justice. What makes something right? Who should have the authority to exercise power? When is punishment deserved? A dictionary cannot tell us these things. To answer these questions, each of us need to develop beliefs. Only then can we determine what justice is.

Of course, not everyone will reach the same conclusions about justice. To be sure, some conclusions will be better than others. But the simple fact is that there are several possible answers to the question "What is justice?" This reminds us of Camus' concept of absurdism: sometimes, there is no single truth.

Even if there is no single truth about justice, we can understand some things about justice as it exists today in Canada.

Canada is a liberal democracy. In a liberal democracy, the state has the power to define what is a crime. As well, the state has the power to formally punish a person if they commit a crime.

This power does not mean that the state can do whatever it wants. Crimes cannot be declared on a whim and punishments cannot be handed out however the state pleases. We define crimes and we set

out the punishments through laws. Our laws are democratic constructs. This means that we, as citizens, collectively decide what justice is.

To think of it another way, our votes determine our governments and our governments determine our laws.

Because citizens ultimately determine the laws in a democracy, we get the laws we both want and deserve. An ill-informed and angry public may let hatred seep into the justice system. On the other hand, a fair-minded and thoughtful public has the power to make justice truly benefit society.

Justice, Not Hatred

When a crime is committed, the law will spell out the possible consequences. Our laws have roots in ancient legal codes such as Hammurabi's Code and the Mosaic Laws. These legal codes delivered justice in two ways: they defined what was wrong, and they prescribed punishments for committing a wrong.

For example, Hammurabi's Code relied upon two types of consequences to achieve justice, retribution and restitution.

Retribution. If a wrong is committed, there should be some proportional punishment upon the perpetrator. This is where we get the idea of "an eye for an eye."

Restitution. The offender must repay the victim for goods stolen, damaged, or lost, or otherwise make amends for the wrong committed.

There are good things and bad things about retribution and restitution. That said, it is easy to see how these concepts could facilitate justice based in hatred.

On their own, retribution and restitution do little to address the underlying causes of crimes. As well, they do little to facilitate healing for the victim, the offender, and the community. Retribution and restitution alone could be considered a very shallow idea of justice.

A deeper idea of justice is rooted in an idea called restoration. Restoration relies on more than just retribution and restitution. Restoration takes a more holistic look at the community. It tries to heal and restore the entire community after a crime has been committed. Movements to incorporate restoration in our justice systems have existed since the beginnings of the Canadian state. Restoration has even deeper roots in traditional Indigenous justice systems.



Hammurabi's Code, circa 1800 BC, contained approximately 275 laws. Each law was written in two parts: a specific situation or case was outlined, and a punishment was prescribed.

Indigenous Justice and Restoration

Understanding restoration from an Indigenous perspective requires an understanding of traditional Indigenous worldviews. These worldviews can be based on a hierarchy of dependencies.

Mother Earth is first in this hierarchy of dependencies, because everything and everyone depends on the earth for survival. The plant order is next because the animal world needs plants to survive. After that comes the animal order. Humans, dependent upon all these levels, are the least powerful and least important element in creation. For everyone and everything to survive and thrive, harmonious interconnections between these orders are required.

Traditional Indigenous laws reflect this worldview. To restore a community's harmony after a crime has been committed, the remedy must take into account the needs of victims, the community, and the offender. Restoration is meant to heal victims and communities, while encouraging offenders to confront the consequences of their actions and heal themselves, too.

Crime and Punishment

Every crime involves unique circumstances. This makes it a challenge to determine the most appropriate consequences. This is why the police generally have some discretion as to whether or not a person will be charged with a crime. As well, for the most part judges have some discretion when determining the punishment if a person is found guilty of a crime.

Sweats, isolation, and the teachings and influences of elders, parents, and grandparents can be used to help accomplish restoration. Also important are the notions of honesty and harmony brought about by forgiveness, restitution, and rehabilitation. Restoration requires us to take a wider look at society when we decide what justice will be.

Restoration and Camus

Retribution and restitution are parts of our justice system. But justice is more than just retribution and restitution. If we view justice as these two ideas alone, we end up with a very narrow conception of justice. In a sense, a narrow view of justice makes us “prisoners”: we are held captive by simple ideas that can let hatred—and not community well-being—grow.

Restorative justice can help us avoid the folly of basing our justice in hatred. The goal of restorative justice is to heal and rebuild. It can use ideas of restitution and retribution, but it looks beyond them too. Restoration requires a broader, more thoughtful look at the well-being of the community. Embracing restorative justice can help us avoid, as Camus put it, “men’s justice, or hatred.”

Discuss

1. How would a belief that all things are interconnected temper hatred as a motivator for justice?
2. Sometimes, a person who commits a crime is sent to prison. It is important to remember that almost every person sent to prison will some day leave prison, and reintegrate into society.
 - a) Is justice achieved if prisoners are treated poorly?
 - b) Would communities be better-off if we invested more into education, addictions counselling, mental health, training programs, and other supports for people in prison?
3. What is your conception of justice?

Part Two • Chapter 2

// it's an
absurd
situation,
but we're
all involved
in it, and
we've got to
accept it as
it is //

(73)

Rieux once again meets Rambert, who is trying to leave Oran.

1. The people of Oran are described as “worried and irritated – but these are not feelings with which to confront a plague.” (66).
 - a) How does worry and irritation manifest itself in Oran?
 - b) Why would worry and irritation be poor feelings for confronting a plague?
2. Re-read the conversation between Rambert and Rieux on pages 72-73 (“You’re using the language of reason, not of the heart”). In what ways does pure reason ignore human needs and tastes?
3. “Public welfare is merely the sum-total of the private welfare of each of us.” (74).
 - a) Are we all merely individuals? Or are we individuals as part of a greater society?
 - b) When making individual decisions, do we need to take into account the welfare of others? What happens if we don’t?





Health Concepts

Plague and Excess Death

Ideally, everyone will live a long and healthy life. However, everyone eventually dies. The reasons for death are varied, and this simple truth makes gauging the death toll of a pandemic a challenging task.

The Plague touches on this idea. As the disease spreads through Oran, the total number of deaths are reported. But this information alone may not be that helpful:

For one thing, all the three hundred and two deaths might not have been due to plague. Also, no one in the town had any idea of the average weekly death-rate in ordinary times the public lacked, in short, standards of comparison. (66-67)

Death statistics from COVID-19 suffer from a similar problem. Public health authorities have generally been adept at reporting the number of illnesses and deaths due to COVID-19. However, this statistic alone does not reveal the full scope of death. This is why some public health researchers also look to a statistic known as excess death.

Excess death is the number of deaths in a given period over and above what would be expected, given historical data. It is calculated by taking the total number of people who die, then subtracting the number of people who would be expected to die.

For example, say 90 people usually die every June in a city. If 100 people died in one particular June, the excess death for that month would be 10. Ten more people died that month than would be expected.

Excess death statistics can provide us with a different perspective on the impact of a pandemic than the death-toll from the disease alone. Because our behaviours change in a pandemic, the ways we die may also change. For example:

- the pandemic may result in increased deaths from other causes. For example, health care systems may be overwhelmed leaving less staff and resources available to treat other diseases.
- the pandemic may result in fewer deaths from other causes. For example, lockdowns and working from home may lead to fewer deaths from road accidents.¹

As we can see, the number of deaths specifically caused by COVID-19 is only one part of the story.

That said, excess death statistics are a broad measurement. Broad measurements often miss details. Consider, for example, if there was a deadly natural disaster during a pandemic, such as a violent earthquake. Because the earthquake has no relation to the pandemic, the excess death statistics would not reflect the pandemic alone.

Statistics can help us understand trends in society. But no single statistic, alone, can tell us the entire story.

If you are interested in tracking excess death statistics, Statistics Canada—Canada's official statistics agency—tracks weekly death rates across the country. Find their tracking tool at www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/71-607-X2020017

Discuss

1. Think about how pandemics change our behaviour.
 - a) What changes could increase the total death rate?
 - b) What changes could decrease the total death rate?
2. As deaths increase in Oran, Dr. Rieux starts to feel indifferent. His indifference brings to mind a saying attributed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin:

“One death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.”²

 - a) Would over-exposure to something like death make us indifferent to it?
 - b) Do statistics alone dehumanise lived experiences?

¹ Hannah Ritchie, Max Roser, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Joe Hasell. “Excess mortality from the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).” *Our World in Data*. <https://ourworldindata.org/excess-mortality-covid>

² These words are often attributed to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. His exact words were not quite these. In the January 20th, 1947 *Washington Post*, he was quoted as saying “If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that’s only statistics.”

Part Two • Chapter 3

// where
some saw
abstraction
others saw
truth //

(78)

Father Paneloux delivers a fiery sermon, saying the plague is God's punishment. He claims that it will separate the just from the unjust.

1. Are the people of Oran particularly religious? Why do they attend the Week of Prayer?
2. How does the storm and its abatement add to the atmosphere of Father Paneloux's sermon?
3. Paneloux warns that science is helpless against the will of God:

"No earthly power, nay, not even – mark me well – the vaunted might of human science can avail you to avert that hand once it is stretched towards you." (81-82)

 - a) Is science helpless against plagues and other calamities?
 - b) Do we put too much faith in the "vaunted might" of science? If so, how?





Historical Context

The "Vaunted Might" of Science

Objective truths can be hard to find. This is why objectivity and truth sometimes is considered an ideal we strive towards, not an end we can always reach. In science, the search for objective truth happens through the scientific method. The scientific method is a dispassionate way of searching for knowledge, putting aside biases in favour of facts.

Generally, the scientific method unfolds by following a process. Scientists formulate an idea (called a hypothesis), then use careful experiments and observations to test the hypothesis. They make conclusions from these experiments and observations. The conclusions are reviewed by other scientists, and if they hold up to scrutiny, then the facts are said to be true.

This method does not mark the end point of knowledge. As understandings and ideas evolve, facts are open to be re-examined, and tested further. This process of observing, experimenting, testing, and re-testing is how science advances our knowledge and understandings of the world. Science is something of a continual building process.

Of course, there is no guarantee that this process will be entirely objective. Scientists may have their own agendas, and bias could creep into their work. As well, the priorities of governments and other funders often determine the broader scientific ideas that societies pursue. Yet, the risk of science being a product of pure bias is mitigated by a belief that scientific work should be open to continual experimentation and tests. After all, the strongest ideas, beliefs, and facts are the ones that can withstand the most vigorous questioning.

This is how the scientific method helps us find truths. Because science helps us find truths, it could be said that, broadly, modern society has faith in science.

A faith in science has disrupted other ways of knowing. This can explain Father Paneloux's pointed remark about the "vaunted might of human science" (81). He says this in his first sermon in *The Plague*, suggesting that at times we may put too much faith in science. Seeing that science is not always perfect, there may be some truth to Father Paneloux's point, too.

Conflicts between science's "vaunted might" and religion have broken out several times over the years. One of history's great conflicts between science and religion unfolded in the 1600s, when the Catholic Church faced off with an Italian scientist named Galileo Galilei.

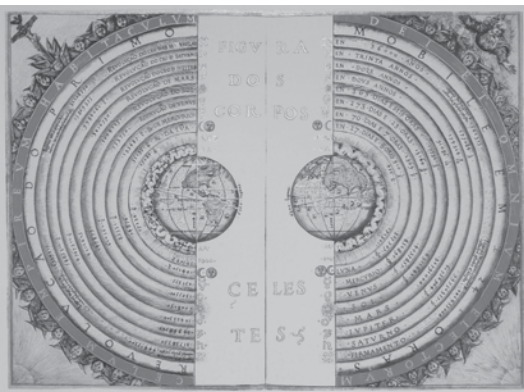


Illustration of the universe orbiting the Earth, from 1568. This theory is called geocentrism. The theory of a universe with the sun at the centre is called heliocentrism. Science has now shown that neither theory is entirely true.

Galileo and the Creation of Modern Science

Galileo Galilei is the so-called father of modern science. He was a mathematician, astronomer, and physicist who lived in Italy from 1564 to 1642.

At the beginning of the 17th century, most educated Europeans believed that Earth was the centre of the universe, and celestial bodies like the sun and the planets orbited Earth. The Catholic Church agreed, using biblical passages to support the view that the Earth was the centre of the universe. But this was not the only theory out there. Alternative theories that said the Earth was *not* the centre of the universe had been around since at least the 4th-century BC. Galileo saw merit in these alternative theories, but had no means to prove them.

The invention of the telescope gave Galileo the opportunity to prove that the Earth was not the centre of the universe. The telescope was developed in the Netherlands in 1608. Galileo caught word of this invention, and soon started building his own. By 1609, he was pointing his telescopes to the sky.

Before long, he discovered four moons circling Jupiter. This discovery put a pretty serious wrinkle in the idea that *all* moving celestial bodies simply orbited Earth. As he observed more events through his telescope, such as sunspots and the phases of Venus, he built the case that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, but instead revolved around the sun. Galileo thus developed a theory that the sun was the centre of the universe.

In addition to being a curious scientist, Galileo was a talented writer and clever self-promoter. He chose to write about his discoveries in Italian. At the time, most thinkers wrote in Latin. By choosing Italian, he was able to reach the lesser-educated people of Italy. As more and more people read about Galileo's discoveries, more and more people began to wonder if the Earth really was the centre of the universe.

Growing acceptance of Galileo's theories annoyed many in Italy's elite, intellectual class. They held on to the traditional view of an Earth-centric universe. Instead of using mathematics and science to disprove Galileo, they instead resorted to character assassination. A campaign was begun to portray Galileo as anti-Catholic.



Galileo Facing the Inquisition, by Cristiano Banti. The Roman Inquisition was a 16th-century Catholic Church process to prosecute crimes against religion.

Galileo was a man of faith, and countered that his theories were not anti-Catholic. After all, the Church's standing practice was to interpret biblical scriptures as allegories when they conflicted with science. Unfortunately, Galileo's discoveries came at a time when the Church was facing off with the Protestant Reformation. Church leaders concluded that his theories would further undermine their authority. Thus, in 1616 the Church ordered Galileo to renounce his views about the Earth.

Galileo's rocky relationship with the Church took a turn for the worse in 1632. He published a book that more-or-less portrayed people who believed in an Earth-centric universe as simpletons. The Church put him on trial, and found him guilty of heresy. His books were banned, and he spent his final years under house arrest before dying in January of 1642.

Galileo's Legacy

Galileo's theory that the sun—and not the earth—was the centre of the universe was a huge paradigm shift. He left a profound legacy that helped change our understanding of science and advance the study of astronomy. And his unceremonious final years under house arrest, with his books banned, stand out as an example of what can happen when scientific discoveries come into conflict with rigid beliefs.

It took centuries for the Church's relationship with Galileo to fully thaw. Starting in 1718, bans on most of his books were lifted. His remains were moved to Florence's main Franciscan church in 1735. By 1835, the Catholic Church had largely dropped its opposition to theories of a non-Earth-centric universe. Finally, successive 20th-century Popes acknowledged Galileo's role in the development of science and the errors that the Church made in their treatment of him and his ideas.

Galileo Galilei's story was not the first time that people with power locked horns with scientists that they did not want to believe. Nor would it be the last time. As we will soon discover, Camus himself watched up close one of the 20th century's great scientific showdowns, between a French biochemist and supporters of Joseph Stalin's Communist Russia.

Discuss

1. Galileo proposed some theories that turned out to be mostly true. He also proposed some theories—such as his theory of tides—that turned out to be completely false.
 - a) If a person has one idea that is good, does it mean that all their ideas will be good?
 - b) What does this tell us about putting blind faith in our leaders?

2. Consider Earth’s central role in life, from an Indigenous worldview:

From the realms of the human world, the sky dwellers, the water beings, forest creatures and all other forms of life, the beautiful Mother Earth gives birth to, nurtures and sustains all life. Mother Earth provides us with our food and clean water sources. She bestows us with materials for our homes, clothes and tools. She provides all life with raw materials for our industry, ingenuity and progress. She is the basis of who we are as “real human beings” that include our languages, our cultures, our knowledge and wisdom to know how to conduct ourselves in a good way. If we listen from the place of connection to the Spirit That Lives in All Things, Mother Earth teaches what we need to know to take care of her and all her children. All are provided by our mother, the Earth.¹

What do we mean when we say something is “the centre of the universe”?

3. Galileo’s theory on the Earth was not the end-point of knowledge on astronomy, or the nature of our universe. In fact, we know now that Galileo was right to point out that the Earth revolved around the sun, but was wrong to suggest that the sun was the centre of the universe. Think back to Camus’ idea of absurdism.
 - a) Is there even such a thing as an end-point of knowledge?
 - b) How do we decide what is worth knowing?
4. How does the liberal democratic ideal of free and open exchange of ideas help society find truths?

¹ Assembly of First Nations. “Honouring Earth.” www.afn.ca/honoring-earth/

Part Two • Chapter 4

// Try as he
might to
shut his
ears to it,
he still was
listening
to that
eerie sound
above, the
whispering
of plague //

(87)

Grand tells Rieux about the novel he is writing.

1. Grand has been spending countless months trying to “perfectly” (88) write the opening sentence to his book.
 - a) Especially in literature and the arts, can something ever be “perfect”?
 - b) How does Grand’s quest for perfection reflect Camus’ idea of absurdism and the search for truth?



Part Two • Chapter 5

// That,
in fact,
was what
struck one
most — the
excellence
of their
intentions //

(90)

Rambert unsuccessfully tries to secure passage out of Oran.

1. Public officials refuse to let Rambert leave Oran. Why must the rules apply equally to everyone?
2. Rambert “obtained much insight into the inner workings of a municipal office” (91) in his attempts to get permission to leave.
 - a) What did Rambert see and do?
 - b) Does the portrayal of municipal governance in this chapter make you more confident or less confident in government? Why?



Part Two • Chapter 6

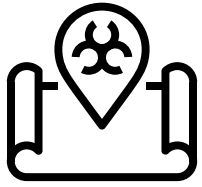
// peppermint
lozenges had
vanished from
the chemists'
shops,
because
there was
a popular
belief that
when sucking
them you
were proof
against
contagion //

(96)

People carry on with activities such as going to restaurants, but they tend to spend recklessly.

1.
 - a) How did the newspapers change their reporting of death tolls?
 - b) Compare this approach to how contemporary media dealt with COVID-19 death statistics. Did the media try to dial down or emphasise the drama?
2. A newspaper, *The Plague Chronicle*, pops up. It promises authoritative information on the disease, but quickly begins to spout nonsense theories and miracle cures.
 - a) Does *The Plague Chronicle* remind you of any online information sources?
 - b) How can we limit the spread of misinformation while respecting the right to freedom of expression?





Think Local

Political Protest



Thousands gather for a peaceful Black Lives Matter rally in Saskatoon on June 4th, 2020.

Breaking Up Protests

When a protest breaks out, there may be a political bias in how authorities react. This is according to a study by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.

They analysed American protests between May 1st and November 28th, 2020, and found disparities in how authorities intervened.

Left-wing protests were more likely to be broken up by police than right-wing protests. When protests were broken up, force against left-wing groups was used 51% of the time. Conversely, force was used to break up right-wing protests 34% of the time.

The people of Oran grow restless under the plague. As the days pass, the general mood begins to shift in a bad direction:

Discontent was on the increase and, fearing worse to come, the local officials debated lengthily on the measures to be taken if the populace, goaded to a frenzy by the epidemic, got completely out of hand. (95-96)

The Plague does not spell out exactly what is meant by the public getting “completely out of hand.” The only thing revealed is that

For in the heat, and stillness, and for the troubled hearts of our townsfolk, anything, even the least sound, had a heightened significance. (95)

Oran has become a tinderbox, where the slightest spark could set off a political fire. This type of environment is not only an issue for Oran of *The Plague*, but also for the world under COVID-19.

Two months into the COVID-19 lockdown, a political fire ignited in the United States. Suggesting just how deep-rooted society’s frustrations are, the fire instantaneously spread across the world. On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd died while in the custody of the Minneapolis police. A horrific ten-minute video of his murder at the hands of a police officer prompted untold thousands of people to say enough was enough, and pour into the streets in protest. Largely under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM)—a group established to bring attention to and help remedy the many injustices faced by Black people—by August 22nd over 16,000 protests took place worldwide.

The events included several peaceful protests in communities across Saskatchewan. From Estevan to Lloydminster, hundreds upon hundreds—and in some of our cities *thousands*—of people peacefully took to the streets to demand racial justice, something we should be immensely proud of.

The epicentre of the protests was the United States, where almost 8,000 happened by the end of August. Unfortunately, a handful of them—7%—had incidents of violence, such as rioting, looting, and vandalism. There is conflicting information about who was responsible: the only certainty is that sometimes, violence cannot be linked to a single source.

Ascribing responsibility for violence during a protest can be difficult. Sometimes, a few supporters of a cause can spark chaos, acting alone and without the approval of the protest's leadership. For that matter, sometimes protests are infiltrated by provocateurs, people who show up to start trouble so they can ruin the reputation of a movement, or to pursue their own violent agenda. And sometimes, what appears to be overreactions by the police can spark violence. This is why it can often be difficult to assign blame when a protest takes a turn towards violence.

Violence and the Right to Protest

The overwhelming majority of all protests in the summer of 2020—especially in Canada—were peaceful and productive. The peaceful nature of these protests is even more remarkable given broader trends in public opinions on violence.



Protests need not be large to bring about public awareness. In July 2020, Tristen Durocher walked 600 kilometres to Regina's Wascana Park, setting up camp and holding a ceremonial fast. He did this to bring awareness to high suicide rates in the province's north. A judge ruled that attempts to remove his camp were unconstitutional: the park was a public square and a place to express dissent. In the judge's words, "In my respectful view, Tristen's ceremonial fast represents an admittedly small and personal attempt to encourage all of us to move a little further along in our national journey."

Three recent American public opinion polls suggested there is a troubling trend afoot regarding attitudes to political violence. Surveys by YouGov in late 2020, and Fortune/SurveyMonkey and the American Enterprise Institute in early 2021 all revealed growing support for political violence. This growing support could not be assigned exclusively to either people on the political left or people on the political right. Support for violence was remarkably similar across both groups. No similar polling is available in Canada.

In liberal democracies such as Canada, we have the right to protest. It is guaranteed in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. However, we do not have the right to violent protest.

In exceptional circumstances, violence could be justified on political, philosophical, or moral grounds: for example, it would be difficult to fault people who violently opposed the Nazi occupation of France. But Nazi Germany has not invaded Canada. It is very difficult to justify violent protest in our society today, especially violence against other individuals.

Besides, from a purely practical perspective, resorting to violent protest increases the chances that we will not get the change that we want.

For example, researchers Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth looked at 323 violent and non-violent protest movements between 1900 and 2006. They found that 53% of the non-violent campaigns were successful in getting the changes they asked for. On the flip side, only 26% of the violent campaigns achieved their aims. Put differently, peaceful protest movements were twice as likely to succeed as violent movements.

Another study from Florida Atlantic University looked at groups seeking greater powers of self-rule. Self-rule can include such things as autonomous governing agreements, or full political independence from a state. Of the 168 racial and ethnic groups across 87 states

that engaged in independence protests, the strongest predictor that a group would be successful was if they used peaceful tactics and protests.

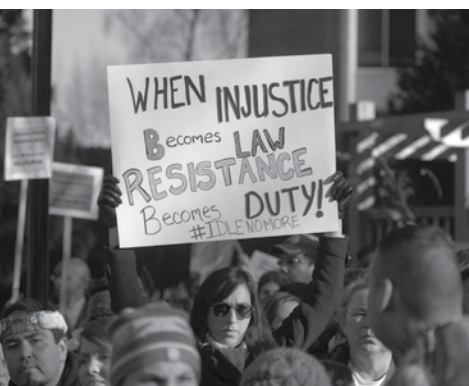
Violent protests may even set back a cause. This was suggested by a recent Princeton University study. It looked at American civil rights protests from 1960 to 1972. In places where non-violent protests took place, votes for the Democratic Party—which generally supported the civil rights movement—increased 1.6–2.5%. Meanwhile, in places where protesters initiated violence, votes by white people for the Republican Party—which generally opposed the civil rights movement—increased anywhere from 1.5–7.9%. Put more simply, peaceful protests strengthened support for civil rights; violent protests strengthened opposition to civil rights.

In fact, the Princeton study suggested that these voting shifts handed victory to Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon in the 1968 election. Nixon defeated Democratic candidate and long-time civil rights advocate Hubert Humphrey.

None of this is to say that there has never been a time or place for violent protest. Every situation is unique. But on the whole, the most effective and the legal avenue for change in a liberal democracy is peaceful protest.

Give Peace a Chance

Violent protest is not only against the law: it risks making protesters and their leaders look more like extremists than fellow citizens. While violent protests usually attract more media attention than peaceful ones, the attention can create a negative perception of the cause. Given that Canadians pride themselves on “peace, order, and good government”—a June 2020 survey ranked this as one of the top reasons why we are proud of our country—it should come as little surprise that people who peacefully use the system to create change have a greater chance of succeeding.



The Idle No More movement—to bring awareness to Indigenous rights—began with a teach-in at Saskatoon’s Station 20 West in December 2012.

Within days, peaceful protests such as flash-mob round-dances were happening across Canada and around the world.

Peaceful protest succeeds in part because it sends signals to several different groups in society. Average citizens become aware of important issues. Like-minded people, who may be reluctant to voice their opinions, learn that others share their beliefs. And people in power learn about and can act upon the desire for change. As former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker said in his memoirs, “There is an inherent fairness in people.” When presented with calls for fairness, decent Canadians will heed those calls.

Understanding the nature of peaceful protest and its power to influence minds helps explain the enormous success of 2020’s Black Lives Matter protests. The overall peaceful approach in Saskatchewan, in Canada, and across the world brought greater awareness to injustices and changed the nature of the conversation. In Canada, public opinion polls during summer and fall 2020 showed that an overwhelming majority of us—usually around 70%—supported the protests and the movement. Their peaceful nature

likely played a role in the widespread acceptance, and have been an important step towards creating a better society.

Discuss

1. Studies have found that when peaceful protesters are treated violently—be it by government authorities or counter-protesters—support for the peaceful protesters’ cause tends to go up.
 - a) Why is this?
 - b) Is violence ever justified against peaceful protesters?
2. Camus had reservations about resorting to violence and murder, but he was not a pacifist. Having been part of the French Resistance, this is understandable. In *The Rebel*, Camus said

Authentic acts of rebellion will only consent to take up arms for institutions which limit violence, not for those which codify it. (256)

In other words, violence could be justified if it is committed in the pursuit of peace.

Discuss the contradiction of using violence to achieve peace. Is it justifiable?
3. Have you witnessed, participated in, or organised a protest? If so, for what cause? Did the protest help change people’s minds?

¹ John Diefenbaker. *One Canada: The Crusading Years 1895-1956*. Macmillan of Canada, 1975, p. 189.

Part Two • Chapter 7

// What's true
of all the
evils in
the world
is true
of plague
as well.
It helps
men to
rise above
themselves.
All the
same, when
you see
the misery
it brings,
you'd need
to be a
madman, or
a coward,
or stone
blind, to
given in
tamely to
the plague //

(106)

Tarrou interviews Rieux, and the discussion turns to the role of God in society.

1. The plague serum is not very effective, and there is not enough supply for everyone. Only families with a sick member receive the serum.
 - a) Is this the best way to ration serum in Oran?
 - b) What is the best way to ration a vaccine in short supply? What evidence do you have to support your assertion?
2. Rieux's mother says "at my age there isn't much left to fear" (104).
 - a) Discuss her attitude. Why would she feel this way?
 - b) Is lacking fear a form of resistance?
3. Consider Rieux's comments about Father Paneloux and his sermon:

Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of truth – with a capital T. (106)

 - a) Rieux has been witnessing death first-hand, Paneloux has not. Do scholars, theorists, and other experts necessarily understand reality?
 - b) How does Rieux's assessment of Paneloux relate to Camus' idea of absurdism?
4. What does Tarrou mean when he says his code of morals is "comprehension" (109)?

Part Two • Chapter 8

// Plague is
here and
we've got to
make a stand //

(112)

Sanitary squads take to fighting the plague. Meanwhile, Grand fusses over the second sentence of his novel.

1. The sanitary squads are an allegory for resistance cells of the French Resistance. Why does the narrator decline to ascribe a great deal of importance to the sanitary squads?
2. The narrator points out that “The local bacillus differed slightly from the normal plague bacillus as defined in text-books of tropical diseases” (112).
 - a) How does this statement apply to the book’s allegorical meaning about France?
 - b) Does all discrimination and oppression follow the exact same form everywhere?
3. What do Grand’s efforts on the second sentence of his novel tell us about the importance of taking action? Can things be over-thought?





Historical Context

Outlawing Science in Camus' Time

Albert Camus knew that truths can have a complicated relationship with power. This is why *The Plague* warns that “again and again there comes a time in history when the man who dares say that two and two make four is punished with death” (111). In fact, this passage from the book can help us understand how Camus forged a strong friendship with French biochemist Jacques Monod.

Camus and Monod met in 1948. Their friendship quickly grew. As Camus wrote in a 1957 letter to him, “I, who feel solidarity with many men, feel friendship with only a few. You are one of these, my dear Monod, with a constancy and sincerity that I must tell you at least once.” Camus and Monod shared similar pasts. Both men had been active in the French Resistance, and both had briefly been members of the Communist Party.

That Monod and Camus were one-time Communist Party members comes as little surprise. Communist parties around the world worked hard, especially in the 1930s, to recruit intellectuals, artists, and scientists to their cause. They believed that if their movement promoted thoughtful, competing views, science could play a strong role in a communist society. This is one reason why communism became popular with many thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s.

Unfortunately, the Soviet Union—the leading communist country for most of the 20th century—was turning increasingly authoritarian at this time. Its leader, Joseph Stalin, began to demand in the 1930s that all scientific theories serve communism. This meant that scientific ideas should only be pursued if they helped to advance communist ideology.

Stalin’s demand had two effects: it undermined the intellectual basis of communism, and in turn, this undermined communism itself. These effects are well-illustrated by Lysenkoism.

Lysenkoism was a wrong-headed Soviet view of genetic science. Lysenkoism undermined the relationship between many scientists with communism. Ultimately, it is believed that Lysenkoism set back the study of genetics in the Soviet Union by fifty years.



French stamp commemorating Jacques Monod. He believed “The most important results of science have been to change the relationship of man to the universe, or the way he sees himself in the universe.”

The Growth of Lysenkoism

When Stalin demanded that all theories—including scientific theories—serve communism, Russian scientist Trofim Lysenko was hard at work developing a new theory of genetics. Lysenko believed that the genetic structure of plants could be changed almost

immediately, by modifying their environmental conditions. Lysenko said that these changed plants would then directly pass on their modified genetic structure to their next generation.

Lysenko thought that this theory could apply to all living organisms, not just plants. The theory ignored some key facts about genetics. However, the theory fit well with the Soviet ideal that a perfect society could be engineered and created.

A handful of Lysenko's early experiments looked promising. However, it soon became clear that there were major problems with his ideas. Nevertheless, because Lysenko's theory served communism, he won Stalin's approval. Lysenko was eventually promoted to the head of the Lenin Academy of Agricultural Sciences, the institute that directed all plant and animal breeding in the Soviet Union.

It would have been bad enough had Lysenko's wrong-headed science only contributed to crop failures in the Soviet Union, which it did. However, the authoritarian nature of the Soviet Union led Lysenkoism down a very dark path.

Soon, dissenting views of genetics were outlawed. Scientists who attempted to demonstrate problems with Lysenko's theories were persecuted. Many ended up in prison, some were even executed. With facts suppressed and researchers oppressed, a cloud of doubt was soon cast over *all* Soviet science. Researchers looking at Soviet science were unsure what was quality research, created through open debate, and what was faulty science, created to please Soviet leaders.

Meanwhile in France, some scientists who were communist party members began to twist their views of genetics to conform with Lysenko. Jacques Monod was deeply frustrated to see scientists put their loyalty to communism ahead of open scientific debate.

Monod's frustration led him to write a scathing article in the September 15th, 1948 edition of *Combat*. In it, Monod demolished Lysenkoism as a "doctrinal fantasy." He explained its scientific shortcomings, and accused the Soviet Union and Lysenko's defenders of corrupting science in the name of ideology.

History has proven Monod correct. He went on to win the Nobel prize, becoming one of the 20th century's most-celebrated scientists. On the other hand, Trofim Lysenko died in disgrace after the Soviets changed their science policies in the mid-1960s.

Shortly before Jacques Monod's death in 1976, he answered a letter from a 13-year-old admirer. In it, Monod outlined the qualities of life that appeared most important to him:

They are: courage, as much moral as physical, as well as the love of truth, or rather, the hatred of lies. I prefer to speak of the hatred of lies rather than the love of truth, since one is never sure of holding the truth, whereas with lies, one is almost always able to detect them, to discover them, and to denounce them.²

Monod believed that to find truths and expose lies, we must be open to debate.

"One must imagine Sisyphus happy"

Albert Camus and Jacques Monod's experiences explain why both feared those times "when the man who dares say that two and two make four is punished with death" (111). Their Resistance against Nazi and Vichy efforts to stifle truth was a central part of their World War II lives. Following the war, both spoke out when they saw excesses taking place in Stalin's Soviet Union. To that point, Camus wrote

The Rebel in part to critique abuses of power with Russia's Communist Revolution. The book ended up costing Camus several friendships.

At the core, Camus and Monod wanted societies that embraced open searches for truth. The common connection of their beliefs can be seen in the opening of Monod's famous 1970 book *Chance and Necessity*. Monod began the book by quoting the closing of Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*: we should find happiness in the search for truth.

Discuss

1. Consider the point raised in *The Plague* that “again and again there comes a time in history when the man who dares say that two and two make four is punished with death” (111). Can you think of instances today where inconvenient facts are swept aside?
2. Think back to Father Paneloux's remark about the “vaunted might of human science” (81). Humans suffer from human weaknesses, such as ego, bias, and greed. What impact would our flaws have on the study of science?
3. Scientific facts evolve as research is done. When the facts change, the recommendations will change. Reflect on the changing health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Is it reasonable for knowledge to be fast-changing and sometimes uncertain in such a time?
4. Consider this widely-circulated meme:



Who is best-suited to grasp the complexities of science? Do we need to trust experts? Are experts always right?

5. A saying often attributed to economist John Maynard Keynes is
“When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?”
When the facts change, what do you do?

¹ quoted in Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*. Broadway Books, 2012, p. 2.

² quoted in Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*. Broadway Books, 2012, p. 496.

Part Two • Chapter 9

// The only
means of
fighting a
plague is
– common
decency //

(136)

Cottard introduces Rambert to smugglers who can get him out of Oran, and Paneloux joins the sanitary squads. Meanwhile, it is revealed that Cottard committed a crime in his past, which has led him to fear punishment. Rieux, Rambert, and Tarrou close the chapter by discussing human nature and its relationship to plague.

1. How is Cottard making extra money?
2. The magistrate tells Tarrou “It’s not the law that counts, it’s the sentence” (122). Discuss this statement. Do you agree?
3. As the death figures rise, Tarrou says that “more stringent measures should be applied” (131).
 - a) Is Tarrou right? Should the rules be tightened?
 - b) Why does society require rules? Are people incapable of acting responsibly without rules?
4. Rambert worries that humans “have lost the capacity for love” (136).
 - a) Do you believe humans can lose this capacity?
 - b) Throughout history, humans interacted within small communities. One school of thought—the “Dunbar Number”—suggests that we are capable of maintaining a meaningful circle of 150 people. This includes 5 loved ones, 15 good friends, and 50 friends. Social media now allows us to interact with thousands if not millions of different people. Do we have the capacity for such large-scale interaction?
5. Rieux says that “the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency” (136). Discuss.
6. Rambert asks to join Rieux in fighting the plague. How would their conversation the night before have led to Rambert’s change-of-heart?



Health Concepts

Absolute Freedom and Universal Health Care

Recall Rambert's statement in *The Plague* that "Public welfare is merely the sum-total of the private welfare of each of us" (74). The idea behind this statement is simple. Everyone is an individual. But none of us exist alone. We interact with other people in countless ways. Family, friendships, religious communities, schooling, workplaces, clubs, and even shopping are ways we interact and rely upon each other. The public—all of us—is a collection of private individuals.

Because we are interconnected, a community can only be healthy if most every individual in that community is healthy.

Think about what happens to individuals in a disease outbreak. Individuals must be quickly and accurately diagnosed, then effectively treated. Diagnosis and treatment helps the patient heal. Diagnosis and treatment also helps to keep the disease from spreading. If individuals are left to be sick, the disease can spread. This will harm the health of the whole community.

This simple reality—that a community cannot be healthy unless its individual members are healthy—is yet another reason why Canada has universal health care.

What is Universal Health Care?

According to the World Health Organization, universal health care is achieved when

all people have access to the health services they need... without the risk of financial hardship when paying for them... [It requires] an efficient health system that provides the entire population with access to good quality services, health workers, medicines and technologies. It also requires a financing system to protect people from financial hardship and impoverishment from health care costs.¹

Put more simply, universal health care provides everyone with quality, affordable (or free) health care.

Broadly, there are three types of universal health care systems.

The first is the Bismarck model, named after Otto von Bismarck. Bismarck was Chancellor of Prussia, an area that is mostly part of modern-day Germany. In 1893, Bismarck introduced a health care plan. The Bismarck model requires citizens to buy health insurance. In return, the government heavily regulates health insurance and health care, to make sure that it is affordable. In this system, doctor's offices and hospitals are either publicly or privately owned. When a person visits the doctor or hospital, the services are paid through their insurance.

The second type is the Beveridge model, named after William Beveridge. Beveridge was a British social reformer and cabinet minister. In 1942, he proposed a model for creating the UK's National Health Service (NHS). The Beveridge model is simpler than the Bismarck model: almost all doctor's offices and hospitals are owned and paid for by the government. Citizens are entitled to use these services.

Canada's model differs from the Bismarck and Beveridge models. It is called the National Insurance model. Generally, doctor's offices are privately owned, and hospitals are publicly owned. The government provides every citizen with health insurance. When we visit the doctor, the doctor sends the bill to the government. When we go to the hospital, our visit is paid for by the government.

Saskatchewan and the Dawn of Universal Health Care

Saskatchewan is the birthplace of Canada's public health care. In 1948, the Tommy Douglas CCF (now called NDP) government introduced universal hospitalisation insurance. Under the program, all hospital visits and diagnostic services would be paid for by the province.

Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, a Progressive Conservative from Saskatchewan, was impressed with what the Douglas government had done. Diefenbaker took Saskatchewan's program national in 1958. The federal government provided every province with funding to implement hospitalisation insurance.

Diefenbaker's move freed up a considerable amount of money in Saskatchewan's health care budget. Thus, in 1962 Saskatchewan was able to implement universal health care insurance, the system we have today. Now, visits to the doctor would also be paid by the government.

Around the same time, Diefenbaker created the Royal Commission on Health Care Services. Its mission was to examine how to provide all Canadians with health care. They examined health care models around the world, and recommended that Canada follow Saskatchewan's model for universal health care.

The report spurred Lester Pearson's Liberal federal government to create a universal health care program for all Canadians. When introducing the new health law in 1966, the Minister of Health and Welfare said that

all Canadians should be able to obtain health services of high quality, according to their need for such services and irrespective of their ability to pay. We believe that the only practical and effective way of doing this is through a universal, prepaid, government-sponsored scheme.²

With this announcement, health care would become a right for all Canadians.

As we can see, the creation of Canada's universal health care was not the work of one politician or one government. Its dawn came from bold action in Saskatchewan, then politicians of all stripes



When universal health care was proposed for

Saskatchewan, not everybody was in favour.

A protest representing this vocal minority of citizens was held at the Legislature on July 11th, 1962.

built on each other's work to create universal health care for all Canadians. Sometimes, a good idea transcends narrow conceptions of politics and ideology.

Universal health care is a recognition of our equality as citizens. Every Canadian is entitled to the same level of high quality health care, regardless of who we are or our ability to pay. And because every Canadian uses the same health care system, every Canadian has a vested interest in making the health care system work. It is a collective program for all, intended to make all of us healthier.

Freedom to Choose?

The *Canada Health Act*—the law governing public health care—prohibits parallel private health care systems. Put more simply, you cannot go to a doctor's office and pay extra to receive quicker or "better" service. Broadly speaking, there is only one health care system in Canada.

Some individuals believe that they should be free to exit Canada's universal health care system and buy private health care. They believe they would benefit by being able to shorten their own waiting times. They also believe that if they exited the public health system, poorer people would benefit: resources would be freed up for the people who remained in the public system.

The Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada poured cold water on this idea. Its comprehensive study of health care systems around the world revealed that allowing separate private health care systems in Canada—sometimes called "two-tier" health care—would damage public health. According to the report, "there is no evidence these solutions will deliver better or cheaper care, or improve access (except, perhaps, for those who can afford to pay for care out of their own pockets)."³ Only a select, wealthy few would benefit if Canada allowed private health care.

Nevertheless, Canada is a liberal democracy that exists under the rule of law. People can challenge laws that they believe violate the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Recently, a British Columbia surgery clinic did this. They argued that universal health care violated Section 7 of the *Charter*. Section 7 guarantees Canadians the right to life, liberty and security of the person. The clinic said that restricting everyone to the public health system infringed upon those rights. They argued that Canadians should be free to buy and sell private health care.

BC's Supreme Court rejected the surgery clinic's argument in 2020. The court ruled that a parallel private system cannot be allowed in Canada, because it would greatly damage public health care. The court pointed to several problems that would be created by "two-tier" health care. For example:

- doctors would exit the public system to get paid more in the private system. This would leave fewer doctors and clinics available for the public system
- health care costs would go up because the public system would need to compete with higher-paid doctors in the private system
- evidence from around the world showed that two-tier health care was objectively worse for the masses than universal health care

In conclusion, the court said that allowing private health care in Canada would

reduce the capacity of the public system to offer medical care, increase the public system's costs, create perverse incentives for physicians, increase the risk of ethical

lapses related to conflicts between the private and public practices of physicians, undermine political support for the public system, and exacerbate inequity in access to medically necessary care.⁴

In short, two-tiered health care might help a select few, but it would damage the health care system used by the overwhelming majority of Canadians.

All *Charter* rights—including the right to life, liberty, and the security of the person—are “subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” Allowing wealthy Canadians the freedom to create their own health care system would harm the health of Canadians as a whole. Therefore, the court found that prohibiting private health care systems is a reasonable limit on freedom.

Universal health care means that every Canadian is entitled to access to high-quality public health care. Like Rambert says in *The Plague*, “Public welfare is merely the sum-total of the private welfare of each of us” (74). If each individual can be healthy, we can all be healthy as a society.

Back to Oran

The Plague contains no discussion about the nature of Oran’s health care system. Nevertheless, the need for one public, universal health care system is illustrated when the plague spreads across Oran.

Recall that there is an unexpected and sudden surge in demand for medical services. This leaves Dr. Rieux to lament that “they lacked adequate means of coping with the disease” (125). Only ten doctors and 100 helpers are available from other towns to help. Oran needs more doctors and medical equipment. However, medical equipment cannot be manufactured overnight and doctors cannot be trained over the course of a weekend. Supply is limited.

Now imagine a two-tier health care system, especially during a global pandemic. Demand for health care would spike. During this time, the rich could buy up as much health care as they wanted. With health care resources being snapped up by the rich, less resources would be available for middle-class and poor people.

The consequence: the health of middle-class and poor people would disproportionately suffer. And as their health declined, the health of the entire community would be harmed.

Discuss

1. Think back to Camus’ statement in *The Rebel* that “absolute freedom is the right of the strongest to dominate” (251). How does health care illustrate the need for reasonable limits on freedoms?
2. How do universal social programs like public health care build social solidarity?
3. Canada does not have universal dental care, eye care, or prescription drug coverage. Should we?

- ¹ World Health Organization. Questions and Answers on Universal Health Coverage. www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/financing/uhc_qa/en/
- ² Alan MacEachen, Minister of National Health and Welfare, quoted in “Making Medicare: The Medical History of Canada, 1914-2007,” Canadian Museum of History, www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/medicare/medic-5h23e.html
- ³ *Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada*. Final Report of the Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada, November 2002.
- ⁴ Supreme Court of British Columbia. *Cambie Surgeries Corporation v. British Columbia (Attorney General)*, 2020 BCSC 1310. www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/sc/20/13/2020BCSC1310.htm



The Plague: Part Three



Part Three of *The Plague* is a one-chapter section chronicling the intensification of the disease. It is a central pivot point for the novel.

The two stand-alone activities help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.

- **Historical Context: Life in Occupied France** deepens the understanding of the historical and political factors that shaped *The Plague*.
- **Historical Context: Antisemitism in France** deepens the understanding of the discrimination in Vichy France.



Both these activities and the chapter questions are key for building understandings of how allegories work, and some of their limits as a literary technique. As well, these activities add to the understandings of how Camus' experiences shaped *The Plague*.



Part Three • Chapter 1

// Our fellow-citizens had fallen into line, adapted themselves as people say, to the situation, because there was no way of doing otherwise //

(148)

Oran enters a phase of depression and pain as the plague intensifies.

1. The plague is especially deadly for people who live in groups. Prisons are particularly hard-hit, partly because prisoners cannot socially distance.
 - a) Why does the narrator suggest the situation in the prisons is “impartial justice” (140)?
 - b) Do you agree? Is the situation in prisons impartial justice?
2.
 - a) How do funerals change with the plague’s intensification?
 - b) Is it reasonable that “sentiments can’t be taken into account” (143) when dealing with funerals?



Historical Context

Life in Occupied France

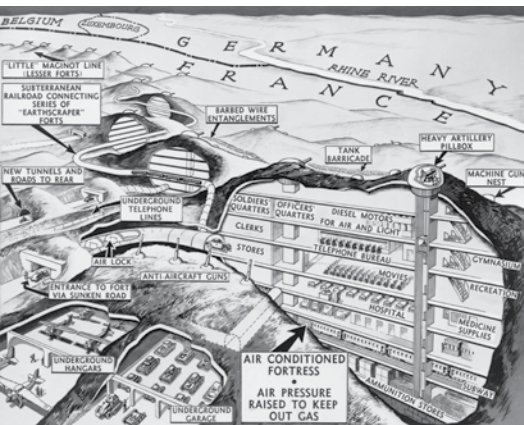
Nazi occupation can be seen throughout *The Plague*. Part Three is an allegory for several realities of day-to-day life in occupied France. In a nod to Nazi skills in carrying out the occupation, the narrator remarks

No, the real plague had nothing in common with the grandiose imaginings that had haunted Rieux's mind at its outbreak. It was, above all, a shrewd, unflagging adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thorough and well. (148)

In France, the skills of the Nazis surprised many. Just like how the people of Oran “had never dreamt it possible that our little town should be chosen out for the scene of such grotesque happenings” (22), in 1939 and 1940 few French people thought it was possible that Germany could take over France. To be clear, people were nervous about war—especially after Germany invaded Poland—but the French were not fearing the worst.

French complacency was fuelled in part by the Maginot Line. The Maginot Line was a series of fortresses along the French-German border, built in the aftermath of World War I. Meanwhile, newspapers such as *Paris-Soir*, where Camus worked as a layout designer in 1940, often reassured readers of France's superior military and its technological might. There were some prominent skeptics of France's readiness, such as Charles de Gaulle, a military officer who would end up leading the Resistance and become France's president after World War II. But for the most part, France was confident in the face of looming danger.

As it turned out, Germany had more skill than France. Despite the fact that French commanders got their hands on the Nazi invasion plan in early 1940 when a German plane crashed in Belgium, France and their allies were out-skilled by the Nazi war machine. Germany's bold strategies, strategic use of new, mechanised warfare technology, and some instances of pure luck proved decisive in securing a quick victory.



Cross-section drawing of the Maginot Line, April 1938.

It reveals an underground complex with railroads, soldier quarters, a hospital, a movie theatre, tanks, and elevators.

Separation

When Germany invaded France, countless thousands of people were displaced. Citizens fled Paris and the surrounding areas, moving south in an effort to avoid the fighting in the north. Meanwhile, as French battalions fell to the Nazis, soldiers were taken as prisoners of war (POWs). In total, 1.5 million French POWs were shipped to Germany.

Facing defeat in Metropolitan France (the area of France on the European continent), the French had three main options available in June 1940. One option was to continue the fight from their

colonial lands in northern Africa. Another option was to take up an offer from the United Kingdom to form a political union with France, and continue the fight together as one country. However, most of France's leaders came to believe that they should take a third option: sign an armistice agreement with Germany. This would allow for some return to a normal life, and opened the possibility of returning France's prisoners of war.

The armistice agreement divided France in two—the German-occupied north (*Zone Occupée*) and the French-controlled south (*Zone libre*). For many, giving Germany virtual control of the north was a better option than continuing with war. While the armed battle between France and Germany came to an end, the armistice agreement did not return life to normal.

One of the many problems created was the separation of people. *The Plague* touches on this separation when it points out that “the chief source of distress, the deepest as well as the most widespread, was separation”(148). French citizens were separated by the Demarcation Line: the border between the north and the south. Citizens could not freely move across this border. Permission was required.



Vichy's President Philippe Pétain meets Adolf Hitler, October 24th, 1940. This photo is often seen to reinforce the belief that Vichy was a willing Nazi collaborator.

Meanwhile, prisoners of war remained separated from their home and family, despite promises in the armistice agreement to bring POWs home. Germany would sometimes exchange POWs for French workers, but this did not end separation: it merely switched who was being separated. Healthy young workers would be shipped to Germany in exchange for sickly soldiers. As well, French prisoners were sometimes shipped to Germany. The net effect was that by the end of World War II, two million French citizens were being held in Germany, half a million more than when the armistice was signed.

Camus personally felt the effects of separation. In mid-November 1942, Allied forces seized Morocco and Algeria, two of Vichy France's colonial holdings in northern Africa. Hitler now faced Allies across the English Channel to the north, and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. He immediately broke the armistice agreement, marched south, and took military control of all of France.

For Camus, the timing of the Allied invasion of Algeria was terrible. At the time, Camus was living in France's Massif Central mountains. His doctor believed the fresh air would help curb his periodic bouts of tuberculosis, so he moved there to work on *The Plague*. Unfortunately, his second wife Francine Faure had just left France for Algeria. Camus planned to join her at the end of November. With Algeria in Allied hands, the two could not visit or even write each other. On the day of the German invasion of the south, Camus wrote “caught like rats” in his notebook.

Shortages and Regulations

In addition to human separation, shortages and regulations plagued people living in France. Just like in Oran of *The Plague*,

So much energy was expended on filling up forms, hunting round for supplies, and queueing up, that people had no time to think of the manner in which others were dying around them and they themselves would die one day. (144)

As the war dragged on, these realities became progressively worse.

The Vichy government was perpetually stretched for resources, due in part to the general circumstances of war, and due in part to the armistice agreement. France agreed to pay Germany for their occupying army in the north. This drained the government of money, leaving it unable to buy up resources for the French people.

Even if the French government had the money to buy goods for its citizens, the war halted most international trade. This left France largely dependent upon whatever domestic production was not confiscated by Germany. With shortages of most basic goods, the French were forced to use rationing cards. Meanwhile, many farmers sold food at inflated prices on the black market.

Communications were also highly regulated. All news was subjected to strict censorship. As well, listening to the BBC was illegal, because they were broadcasting programs and coded messages for the French.

Even interpersonal communication was highly regulated. At the beginning of the occupation, people could not send letters from the north to south and vice-versa. Instead, a special 13-line card was to be used, and only for communicating with family members. People checked off words such as “in good health” and “no news of.” Letter-writing rules were progressively relaxed, however.



Charles de Gaulle, speaking from BBC Broadcasting House in central London. Exiled governments from across Europe, including France, often used the BBC to send radio messages to their home countries.

Meanwhile, just like how “the establishment of a curfew hour” (141) happened in Oran, France was put under a curfew. The curfew time often changed—sometimes daily in the case of curfews for Jews—in an effort to confuse the population.

After sunset, both Oran and France were “plunged in complete darkness” (141). Turning off lights conserved scarce energy. However, in war-ravaged France turning off the lights was also done for military reasons: if French cities were in complete darkness, Allied bombers would have difficulties finding their targets.

For the people of Paris in particular, the darkness was a foreign concept. In the 19th century, Paris became known as The City of Light. This was due in part to its well-lit streets at night. Paris embarked upon a street-lighting program in the 1800s to improve its reputation. The belief then was that the nighttime darkness of cities contributed to their seediness and immorality.

Persecution and Death

When *The Plague* says that “people were dying all around them” (144), this also is an allegory for France. Over half a million French civilians and soldiers died during World War II. This includes an estimated 70,000 French civilians who died from Allied bombing efforts during the occupation. One group at particular risk during the occupation were resisters. If somebody was caught in an act of resistance, the Nazis and their Vichy collaborators showed no mercy.

In Occupied France, it was a taboo to harm occupying German military officers. If harm came to them, retribution was swift and lopsided. This harsh approach dampened the resistance, because harming a German officer led to even greater suffering for people not involved in the attack.

A famous example of this system of injustice took place in the northwestern French city of Nantes in 1941. Three communist Resisters shot and killed a German naval officer. The shooting was to avenge the arrest and killing of two young communists who attended an anti-German rally in Paris.

Almost immediately, the Vichy government sentenced six communist prisoners to death by a *sections spéciales* court. Vichy set up these courts in 1941 to prosecute communists and anarchists, as a form of martial law. The *sections spéciales* courts could only give one of three possible penalties for those found guilty: life imprisonment, hard labour, or death. Appeals were not allowed and sentences were to be carried out immediately.

What is Martial Law?

Martial law is a form of rule that suspends normal laws. The military is given permission by the government to enforce order.

Despite the killing of six communists, Hitler was not satisfied with Vichy’s response. He ordered that 50 French prisoners—reflecting a broad swath of French society—be shot immediately, along with another 50 if the officer’s killers were not found in two days. Almost immediately, 48 prisoners were shot and killed.

An effort to halt the second round of executions quickly sprung up. Nantes’ mayor and bishop, and even Vichy’s leader Marshall Pétain, urged that the second round not go ahead.

In an effort to stop the executions, something else particularly unusual happened. 5,000 residents of Nantes pivoted into a show of solidarity with the Germans, solemnly following the dead officer’s coffin at his funeral procession. Just as the narrator says in *The Plague*, “Our fellow-citizens had fallen into line, adapted themselves, as people say, to the situation, because there was no way of doing otherwise” (149). With the lives of 50 fellow citizens in immediate danger, the people of Nantes fell into line, attempting to show the Germans their goodwill and fealty.

Hitler was satisfied, and the second round of killings did not go ahead. Nevertheless, the message was sent. There would be a high cost for direct acts of resistance, and those costs would be spread across French society.

To Resist?

Just like *Y. pestis* in *The Plague*, the Nazis and their collaborators proved themselves to be a “shrewd, unflagging adversary; a skilled organizer, doing his work thorough and well” (148) This is not to say that they were doing honourable work: it is only to say that they were ruthlessly smart in how they approached their task. Nazis and their collaborators made life in occupied France an experience of suffering. Separation, shortages, regulations, and the risk of death were all realities.

Even though the Nazis were skilled, history has shown that they could be stopped. The military might of the Allies, alongside the forces of the French Resistance, were able to push back this *peste brune*. But it was not an easy task.

Discuss

1. Choose any situation or idea in Part Three Chapter 1 that could be an allegory for the Nazi occupation.
 - a) What direct connections between the fictional situation and occupation can you find?
 - b) In what ways does the situation not quite apply to the occupation?
 - c) What do these similarities and differences tell us about the uses and limits of allegories?
2. Choose any situation or idea in Part Three Chapter 1, perhaps in the last few pages, and compare it to living through COVID-19.

¹ Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*, Broadway Books, 2013, p. 157.



Historical Context

Antisemitism in France

Many people suffered during France's occupation. Some people, like members of the Communist Party, suffered more than the average person. However, one group of people suffered more than most anybody else: France's Jewish population.

Recall that the narrator of *The Plague* claims that "Plague had levelled out discrimination" (149). This is scientifically true, in the way *Y. pestis* can infect a society. As Dr. Nicholas Christakis points out, during a full-blown *Y. pestis* epidemic, "social distinctions cease to matter." At this point, there is no hiding from plague: it attacks everyone equally and indiscriminately. This can be seen in the storyline in *The Plague*.

However, the narrator's claim about levelled-out discrimination does not quite hold up as an allegory for what was happening in World War II France. In particular, Jews were being aggressively singled out. This was a dramatic change.

Jewish People in France during World War II

Interwar France was perhaps Europe's most welcoming nation for Jews. By 1940, 350,000 Jewish people lived in France. About half were French citizens. Many others were permanent residents. And a significant portion were refugees, people who found themselves without a safe state once the Nazis began their takeover of Germany and later Europe. The Jewish community gained prominence in France's legal, medical, financial, and arts communities. In fact, a Jewish person—Léon Blum—became France's Prime Minister in 1936.

When Germany occupied France's north, many Jews escaped to the south. *Zone libre* was considered safer because it still was free of Nazis. Those who wanted to join the French Resistance went to Toulouse or Lyon, hotbeds of the movement. Many others fled to a small area around Nice occupied by Italy, because Italy did not have a Jewish persecution policy.

All the same, wherever Jews went in France they faced discrimination. In fact, the Vichy government, shortly after taking power, quickly passed a series of antisemitic laws that in some ways were worse than Germany's antisemitic laws. This would mark the first time since the French Revolution that France would create laws that singled out a particular religion.

At first, some Vichy operatives cast their plans for antisemitic legislation—*Statut des Juifs* (Jewish Law)—as something that was only intended to target foreign-born Jews living in France. French Jewish citizens, so their narrative went, would be safe. This approach played into nationalist sentiments of the time, casting non-citizens as people less worthy of rights.

Even the law's name could give the impression that it was about foreign-born Jews. Since the nineteenth century, the French Jewish community self-identified as *israélite*, because *juif* had become a derogatory term in France. However, the law did not make a distinction between foreign-born and French Jews. Its implementation was sometimes uneven, but the law applied to all Jewish people in France.

The first laws came into effect in October 1940. Jews were barred from the army, the civil service, the press, and other jobs where they could influence public opinion. As well, Jews were excluded from using financing or credit, effectively leaving them unable to own a business. Further, several thousand Jews were stripped of citizenship. In Algeria in particular, all Jewish people lost their French citizenship, becoming redefined as “Native Jews.” In June 1941, a second round of laws were passed. Professions such as doctors and lawyers were limited to 2% Jewish membership. Jewish property was confiscated by the French government. And Jews were banned from places like the theatre and subjected to an early curfew.

Adding to the problems for French Jews, a June 1942 Nazi decree required Jews in the occupied north to wear a yellow Star of David in public. Meanwhile, Jewish people—first foreign-born, then some French

citizens—were being rounded up. They were either housed in French detention camps or sent to Germany, as Nazis were demanding quotas of Jews. As legal scholar Vivian Grosswald Curran summarised it, Jews “became progressively hemmed in by increasing numbers of laws depriving them of their rights to property, freedom, and, finally, to life itself.”² Because Jewish people had no safe state that would take them in, their fate was largely determined by the governments of the countries where they resided.

Amid this darkness, there are countless stories of heroic French individuals. Many people were kind to Jews, helped them live, helped them hide, and helped them escape. For that matter, by 1943 French officials became less willing to deport Jews to Germany. By that point, most Jews left in France were French citizens and the government was less willing to deport its own citizens. Nevertheless, the French State—like so many countries of the era—has a dark historical record of antisemitism. Nearly 80,000 Jews living in France died, some in French detention centres but most in German death camps. Of those killed, one-third were French citizens.



The *Statut des Juifs* made it obligatory for all Jewish-owned businesses to post a declaration of their owner’s religion. Singling out people in such a negative way created “others,” and undermined the idea of our shared humanity.

Camus and Jewish People

In many ways, what happened in France was a continuation of a centuries-old history of scapegoating minorities—including Jews—during times of crisis such as plagues. Camus was well-aware of this historical tendency to persecute minorities in times of crisis. When creating *The Plague*, he wrote in his notebook

1342 – The Black Death in Europe. The Jews are murdered.

1481 – the plague ravages the South of Spain. The Inquisition says: The Jews.³

Despite these notes, *The Plague* is not heavily invested in allegorically exploring the specific plight facing Jews in occupied France. The book can be read as a broader, shared human experience of fear living under Nazi occupation.

That understood, Camus was very familiar with and participated in the Jewish experience. He was close friends with several Algerian Jews, even having taught French to Jewish children for a short time prior to the war. When the occupation began and Vichy passed its antisemitic laws, he wrote to a Jewish friend,

All of this is particularly unjust and despicable... but you need to know that those untouched by the law are not indifferent. I vow to hold fast to everything we hold in common. I will never tire of saying this as long as it remains necessary.⁴

Camus' actions during the occupation showed him to be true to these words.

In 1942, Camus lived in a small mountain village as he wrote some of *The Plague*. It was only two kilometres from Le Chambon, the area's centre of nonviolent resistance. In fact, several Jews were hidden in the same boarding house where Camus resided. During this time, Camus often dined with a

Jewish French Algerian named André Chouraqui. Chouraqui was active in the Resistance, and spent hours talking with Camus about the plague and its significance in the Hebrew Bible. Chouraqui told Camus biographer Patrick Henry that when it came to local resistance activities, "Of course Camus knew everything that was going on."⁵ When Camus left the mountain village for Paris, part of his resistance efforts included helping a Jewish woman escape to Le Chambon.

"Outsiders" and Disease

Perceived "outsiders" have long been treated as responsible for outbreaks of disease, contrary to facts.

For example, a suspected case of *Y. pestis* in San Francisco in March 1900 led to the complete lockdown of Chinatown and the forced inoculation of residents—except for white residents, who were allowed to leave.

Likewise, a 1924 outbreak in Los Angeles led to the quarantine and destruction of 2,500 homes, mostly of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Hebrew University of Jerusalem professor David Ohana sums up Camus' role during the occupation by saying that his "conduct towards Jews in the war was exceptional and impressive, and he endangered his life more than once."⁶

While *The Plague* is not strictly focussed on Jewish experiences during the Occupation, Camus later wrote a novel that explored the moral and ethical challenges that the Holocaust in particular presented. His last completed novel *La Chute* (The Fall) is set in Amsterdam and positioned against World War II: it begins with the narrator considering how he lives in the city's former Jewish quarter, cleared out of Jewish people by Hitler. According to literary critic Shoshana Felman, *The Fall* was meant as a condemnation of the people of his generation who remained silent during the Holocaust.

Discuss

1. France's Jewish community was gaining prominence during the interwar years. For some people, this did not sit well.
 - a) Do you think some people resent the success of others, especially successful minorities?
 - b) If so, how can literature help remedy this problem?
 - c) If so, how can the law help remedy this problem?
2. The French Republic was based on the ideals of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). How did Vichy France's obsessive, negative focus on the identity of Jewish people undermine these ideals?
3. Think back to Rieux's statement that "the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency" (136).
 - a) In times of crisis especially, why do some people look to cast blame?
 - b) Can you think of instances of blame-casting during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - c) Why would common decency be a better approach?

¹ Nicholas A. Christakis. *Apollo's Arrow*. Hachette Book Group, 2020, p. 179.

² Vivian Grosswald Curran. "Law and Human Suffering: A Slice of Life in Vichy France." *Law & Literature*, vol. 29 no. 1, 2017, p. 65.

³ Sean B. Carroll. *Brave Genius*, Broadway Books, 2013, p. 155.

⁴ quoted in Robert Zaretsky. *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*. Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 56-57.

⁵ quoted in Brian Farrell. "Albert Camus' 'The Plague' and the art of living during times of catastrophe." *Waging Nonviolence*. 14 April 2020. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/podcast/albert-camus-the-plague-nonviolent-resistance-rescue-wwii-coronavirus/>

⁶ David Ohana. "Camus and the Israelis." *Israel and its Mediterranean Identity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 137.



The Plague: Part Four



Part Four of *The Plague* recounts how the plague impacts the lives of people in Oran during its deepest moments. The crisis requires people to consider their role in creating and contributing to a just society.

There are six stand-alone activities in this section that can help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.



- **Historical Context: A Closer Look at the French Resistance** deepens the historical and political context of *The Plague*.
- **Health Concepts: A Brief History of Vaccines** builds on ideas about the scientific method, as well as deepening understanding of the medical science behind the book.
- **Health Concepts: Vaccine Hesitancy and the Law** expands on the concept of vaccines, while opening up consideration of how the law balances the needs of the public as a whole with some people's individual desires.
- **Historical Context: World War II Internment Camps** continues building on the historical context of *The Plague*, while also deepening student concepts of justice.
- **Think Local: Pandemics and Prisons** presents another way that society has evolved since *The Plague* was written, as well as opening up considerations of how students can continue to develop their sense of justice.
- **The Philosophy of Camus: The Death Penalty** builds understandings of Camus' philosophical beliefs that underpin *The Plague*, while advancing considerations about the uses and limits of violence as a means for achieving change.



With the broader philosophical, historical, health, and literary ideas that shape *The Plague* established in Parts One through Three, Part Four allows for deeper application of these ideas as they appear in the novel.

Part Four • Chapter 1

Rieux finds he is becoming overrun with emotions, and feels he should correct this.

// his freedom
and his
life may
be snatched
from him at
any moment //

(161)

1. Grand's workload begins to strain him.
 - a) What kinds of "fixed ideas" (154) does Grand look to in this time?
 - b) How does looking forward and looking back in such a way help people get through difficult moments?
2. Rieux's role as a doctor changes, from saviour to public health enforcer. He now "came accompanied by soldiers, and they had to hammer on the door with rifle-butts before the family would open it" (156). Why would people not want to let doctors into their homes?
3. Are Oran's doctors properly following all health precautions?
4. Cottard is in a state of contentment, not revolting against the plague. Review Tarrou's notes "Cottard and his Relationship with the Plague."
 - a) How has Cottard changed from when we first met him in Part One Chapter 2?
 - b) Do people who are hurting thrive in a world of hurt?
5. Cottard and Tarrou watch a performance of Gluck's *Orpheus*, an opera about a rescue mission from hell. After surviving hell, the actor playing Orpheus collapses on stage. He appears to be stricken by plague. Consider this scene. What is being said about the power of the plague?

Part Four • Chapter 2

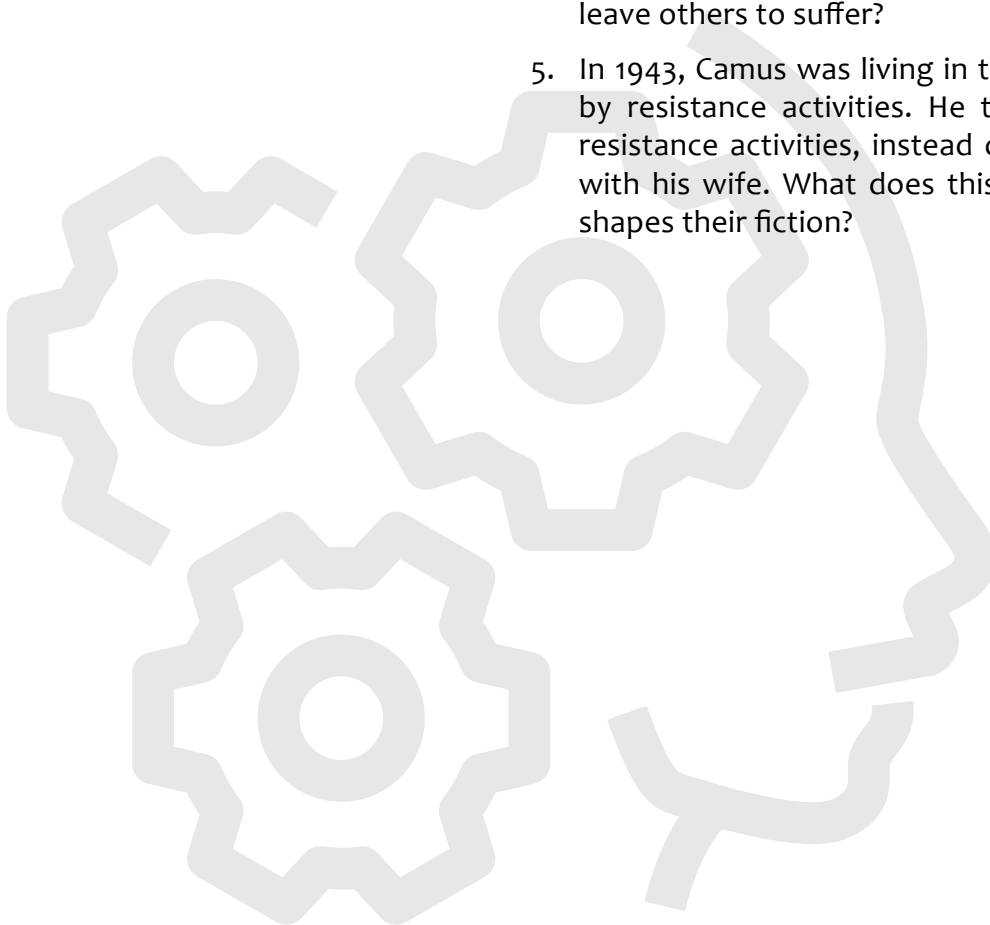
// This
business is
everybody's
business //

(170)

Rambert decides to stay in Oran to fight the plague.

1. The magistrate, Monsieur Othon, hints that Rambert needs to be careful about attracting attention to himself.
 - a) Is Othon becoming sympathetic to the sanitary squads?
 - b) Police can issue warnings instead of pursuing formal charges for many less serious crimes. Judges have similar options if a person is found guilty of many less serious offences. Why must the legal system provide the police and judges with some discretion to use personal judgment?
2. Tarrou says “At my age one’s got to be sincere. Lying’s too much effort” (168).

Do you agree? Is it easier to just tell the truth?
3. What does Tarrou say about the effectiveness of masks? Is this true for *Y. pestis*?
4. Rambert decides to stay in Oran and fight the disease, instead of escaping to Paris to be with the lady he considers his wife. He says “if he went away, he would feel ashamed of himself” (170). Consider Rambert’s actions. Can you be happy if you leave others to suffer?
5. In 1943, Camus was living in the French mountains, surrounded by resistance activities. He then moved to Paris to continue resistance activities, instead of trying to escape to Oran to be with his wife. What does this tell us about how a writer’s life shapes their fiction?





Historical Context

A Closer Look at the French Resistance

Oran's sanitary squads are an allegory for French Resistance cells. By the close of Part Four Chapter 2, most of *The Plague's* main characters have joined the squads. Those who join the fight see it as something that extends beyond personal self-interest: as the narrator says when plague first breaks out, fighting it is "the concern of all" (111). This point is later reinforced by Rambert, when he comes to realise that "this business is everybody's business" (170).

The characters involved in the squads come from different segments of society, yet another indication of how the fight is everybody's business. Dr. Rieux and Dr. Castel are part of the professional class. Father Paneloux is a member of the clergy. Grand is a civil servant. Rambert is a journalist and, like Tarrou, an outsider who is unwittingly caught in the outbreak. Monsieur Othon is a magistrate who grows sympathetic and eventually joins the squads once his son dies from the disease. There are even Spaniards helping out the cause.



Francisco Franco, Spain's authoritarian leader meeting with Hitler, 1940. With the backing of Germany and Italy, Franco's forces won the Spanish civil war in 1939. Tens of thousands of Spaniards fled to France. These exiles—known as the Spanish Maquis—saw the French Resistance as part of their broader struggle against fascism.

The French Resistance was much more diverse than Camus' cast of characters. Though predominantly made up of young people, its members came from all corners of society. Name most any social class, profession, religion, economic class, age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or any other sub-category of society, and you could probably find a resister who fits that description. Some resisters joined early, others had supported Vichy but then switched sides.

Resisters shared a common bond: opposing Nazi Germany and its Vichy collaborators. Their acts of resistance were just as diverse as their human characteristics. Resistance could be as simple as raising a French tricolour flag. Resistance could be as complex as creating and implementing plans to destroy key manufacturing or transportation infrastructure. Some resisters built and maintained networks of escape routes for stranded Allied soldiers and individuals fleeing persecution. Other resisters spied and provided intelligence to the Allies. A few resisters wrote propaganda to strengthen support for the cause. No matter their actions, the one commonality these actions shared is that they happened underground and in the shadows, to avoid detection by the authorities.



A member of the French Communist Party (PCF) caught by German officers, 1944. PCF resistance was hamstrung by Communist Russia's non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. When Germany declared war on Russia in June 1941, the PCF became full-out Resisters.



Simone Segouin joined the Resistance at the age of 17, in 1942. Having participated in activities ranging from smuggling messages to blowing up trains to capturing German soldiers, France awarded her the *Croix de Guerre* for her heroism.

Leadership and Organisation

The leadership of the Resistance is often attributed to a young French general, Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle rejected France's armistice with Germany. He fled to Britain in June 1940 and set up a government-in-exile, known as Free France.

When de Gaulle left for the United Kingdom, he was a junior minister in the French government. Unlike some other countries whose major figures took refuge in the UK when their governments were toppled, no other members of France's government came along. This put de Gaulle's leadership on shaky ground. Despite a rocky relationship with many Allied leaders, he gradually established his authority. De Gaulle helped the Allies take France's overseas colonies back from the Vichy government, and he then played an important role in pushing the Nazis out of France.

One reason why it is difficult to call de Gaulle *the* leader of the Resistance is because the Resistance had no formal leadership, at least in the early years. It was a collection of countless loosely-organised small groups, much like the sanitary squads in *The Plague*. For resisters, it was dangerous—if not impossible—to centrally organise. Instead, resisters intermingled behind the scenes, forming a massive informal web.

Underground pamphlets and newspapers helped keep this informal web connected, especially in the early years. These publications provided information and editorial guidance. Camus became the editor of a leading Resistance newspaper, *Combat*, in 1944.

Some official guidance came from the BBC. Their *Radio Londres* service was the voice of de Gaulle's Free France. It spread news and coded messages across France. Often, BBC broadcasts included instructions for Resistance fighters.

The loose connections of Resistance fighters and de Gaulle's Free French were brought closer together when the Allies took France's African colonies from Vichy. Free France established a government in Algiers. Their strengthened position on French territory helped to organise the Resistance. De Gaulle further fortified his government's authority by negotiating positions within it for French Communists. Including Communists in the Free French government helped build solidarity between diverse political groups.

The Resistance itself became more formalised with the creation of the *Conseil National de la Résistance* (National Council of the Resistance) in 1943. It was a collection of resistance groups, political parties, and trade unions united in their opposition to the Nazis and Vichy. The council's formation led to better-coordinated resistance, providing guidance from the top. It also gave formal recognition to



de Gaulle as their leader. By 1944, Resisters on the ground in Nazi-occupied France were renamed the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (French Forces of the Interior).

Nonetheless, the formal structuring of the Resistance that began in 1943 did not mean that all resisters marched to the beat of a single drum. De Gaulle may have become its “leader,” but in reality the Resistance remained loose and at times unwieldy. Each group of resisters on the ground still needed to operate in the shadows, and largely independently, in order to escape detection. So while they had stronger leadership as the war progressed, right up until France’s liberation, they were a diverse group most tightly-bonded not by their leadership but by their singular belief: that ousting Vichy and the Nazis from France was, as Rambert put it, “everybody’s business.”

Combat, Issue 46, August 1st, 1943. Many underground Resistance newspapers carried on in the mainstream after the occupation.

Discuss

1. Consider the diverse make-up of the French Resistance.
 - a) In the face of a common enemy, do we need to put aside our differences?
 - b) What compromises to your values would you be willing to make in the face of a common enemy?
2. The Archbishop of Toulouse, Jules-Géraud Saliège, engaged in a famous act of resistance. On August 23rd, 1942, he denounced France's internment camps:

In our diocèse, terrible scenes have taken place in the camps of Noe and Recebedou. Jews are human beings. Foreigners are human beings. All things cannot be done against them, against these men, against these women, against these fathers and these mothers. They are part of the human race. They are our brothers as so many others are. A Christian cannot forget this.¹

Resisters made hundreds of thousands of copies of his message, and it quickly spread across France.

- a) Think about this message and how it was spread about. What does this tell us about how resistance activities functioned?
- b) Is resistance only accomplished through “great acts” by “great people”?

¹ quoted in Marc-Olivier Baruch. “Vichy and the Rule of Law.” *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, vol. 6, 2000, <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/2992>

Part Four • Chapter 3

// Whether you
wish it or
not, we're
allies,
facing
them and
fighting
them
together. //

(179)

Dr. Castel's anti-plague serum is tested on Monsieur Othon's son Jacques. The boy dies, but his prolonged death suggests that Castel is making progress on developing a serum.

1. When Othon's son is diagnosed with plague, the Othons are sent to isolation camps. Quarantine was used to reduce the spread of plague.
 - a) How does Othon react when told he will have to stay at a shabby tent camp at the Municipal Sports Grounds?
 - b) What would happen to society if the people who uphold the law believed that they should be exempt from the law?
2. Rieux believes that young Othon's case is hopeless. He thinks that there is nothing to lose by trying Castel's experimental serum.
 - a) What is Paneloux's observation about trying the serum on the boy?
 - b) Discuss the ethics of Rieux's decision. Is it the right thing to do?
3. Consider the discussion between Paneloux and Rieux that closes the chapter.
 - a) What unites the two men?
 - b) Where do the two men differ?
 - c) How is their disagreement similar to the make-up of the French Resistance?



Health Concepts

A Brief History of Vaccines

In *The Plague*, Dr. Castel works to develop a plague serum. Castel's colleague, Dr. Rieux, believes that without a serum, there is little that doctors can do to halt the plague:

Towards the close of October Castel's anti-plague serum was tried for the first time. Practically speaking, it was Rieux's last card. If it failed, the doctor was convinced the whole town would be at the mercy of the epidemic, which would either continue its ravages for an unpredictable period, or perhaps die out abruptly of its own accord. (172)

In the past, before the discovery and widespread use of antibiotics, plague serums could be effective tools for fighting *Y. pestis*.

The first time plague serum was used was in 1896. Alexandre Yersin, the person who discovered the *Y. pestis* bacteria, gave a plague serum to 23 sick patients in Hong Kong. Only two died. For a disease with almost certain mortality, this was a great success. Unfortunately, Yersin's subsequent uses of plague serum were not always as successful.



Edward Jenner, pioneer of the modern vaccine. The Jenner Institute believes that the task he started may have saved more lives than any other person's work.

Plague serums were often developed from the blood of horses who were immune to plague. The horse blood contained antibodies, able to fight off the disease. By injecting patients with the horse's plague-fighting antibodies, the patient had a much better chance of overcoming the disease.

Serum injections were also used to provide healthy people with short-term immunity to plague. The injected antibodies could remain in the body for a few weeks or maybe even a few months, fighting off infections. However, serums cannot provide long-term immunity. To obtain long-term immunity to diseases such as plague, vaccines are needed.

The Development of Vaccines

Vaccines work differently than serums. A vaccine usually involves the injection of a dead or weakened disease organism (or parts of it) into the body. The injection prompts the body to start developing its own antibodies to fight off that disease. Because vaccines train the immune system to create its own antibodies, vaccines



Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the influential wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire. She learned about variolation while in Constantinople in 1717 and spread the word to England.

Four years later, seven English prisoners were given the option of experimental variolation as an alternative to execution. The experiments—along with subsequent experiments on orphans—proved successful, helping make variolation commonplace in Europe.



Dr. Jenner vaccinating his gardener's son, James Phipps, with cowpox. Both cowpox and smallpox are caused by variations of the orthopoxvirus.

provide long-term immunity to diseases. Put simply, vaccines protect us from disease.

Before vaccines, there only was one accepted way to immunise people: a process called variolation. Variolation was used to give people immunity to one particularly deadly disease: smallpox. The procedure originated in China, and knowledge of it moved its way westwards as trade and travel expanded. Reports of variolation in Europe and Africa date back to at least the 1600s. Meanwhile, African slaves brought their knowledge of the procedure to the present-day United States in the early 1700s.

To variolate a person, pus from a smallpox lesion was taken from a patient, and then scratched into a healthy person's skin. Another method had doctors blow dried smallpox scabs up people's noses. For reasons still not entirely understood, the exposure would only spur a mild case of smallpox. The mild smallpox infection would train the immune system to develop antibodies to the disease.

Unfortunately, variolation was not perfect. Sometimes people developed full-blown smallpox, leaving them seriously ill or even dead. Other unlucky recipients contracted diseases such as syphilis or tuberculosis, if the smallpox pus came from a person carrying such diseases. Further, people who contracted mild smallpox through variolation were contagious while the disease ran its course. Without careful isolation, they could spread the disease. Still, the death rate from variolation was usually no more than 2%, a far cry from the 20-60% mortality rate of a serious smallpox outbreak.

Variolation quickly spread across 18th-century England. One recipient was an eight-year-old boy named Edward Jenner. His treatment turned out fine, and he grew up to become a doctor. Knowing the risks of variolation, in 1796, Dr. Jenner set out to develop a better way to immunise people from smallpox.

English farm folklore had it that milkmaids who contracted cowpox—a comparable but much milder disease—would never contract smallpox. Similar tales had been floating around India for centuries. By the mid-1700s, most people believed that there was truth to these stories. Jenner wanted to prove it.

When Jenner diagnosed Sarah Nelmes, a local milkmaid, with cowpox in May 1796, he saw his chance to see if cowpox would make people immune to smallpox. Jenner took pus from her cowpox lesion, and exposed his gardener's son to it. The boy developed mild cowpox. A few weeks later, he exposed the boy to smallpox. The boy did not come down with the disease. It appeared that controlled exposure

to cowpox would provide immunity to the much more dangerous and disfiguring smallpox. Jenner called his innovation a vaccine, after the Latin word for cow, *vacca*.

Jenner spread the word about his vaccine. In 1797, he submitted a short paper describing his work to the Royal Society, the United Kingdom's national academy of sciences. The Royal Society rejected the paper. Not dissuaded, he performed more scientific experiments to verify his findings. Then, in 1798, he published *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae, a disease discovered in some of the western counties of England, particularly Gloucestershire, and known by the name of "The Cow Pox."* He travelled to London to promote his findings. Doctors were impressed and passed along the news to their colleagues. In a few short years, the smallpox vaccine spread across much of the world.

Realising the enormous public health benefits of vaccinations, Bavaria, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway created mandatory smallpox vaccination laws by 1821. England banned variolation in 1840 and made infant vaccination compulsory in 1853. And several American states, beginning with Massachusetts, mandated that people be vaccinated. Vaccination worked so well that, following a 20th-century global vaccination effort, smallpox disappeared entirely. And so the end came for a disease once responsible for one out of every twelve deaths. Today, only lab specimens remain in the United States and in Russia.



Blossom, the cow that gave Sarah Nelmes cowpox. Its hide is on display at St George's Medical School in London.

To be sure, Jenner's accomplishment is not the story of one person. His work built on centuries of prior knowledge and experimentation, across many cultures. And Jenner was not even the first person to immunise people using cowpox. During a 1774 smallpox outbreak in Downshay, England, a farmer immunised his family using a haphazard mix of a knitting needle and a neighbour's cow. As well, similar procedures were tried in France in the late 1700s. Nonetheless, Edward Jenner's understanding of past knowledge, his use of the scientific method of controlled and reproducible experiments, and his dogged determination to promote his discovery, gave him a place in history as the person credited with creating the vaccine.

Germ Theory

For the most part, Jenner's smallpox vaccine worked. Yet, experts—Jenner included—were unsure about how it worked. It took over sixty years for the next great breakthrough in vaccine science. In the mid-1800s, there was a great French-German scientific rivalry. French scientist Louis Pasteur and German scientist Robert Koch were often in competition with each other, building upon each others' discoveries. Their work led to the creation of modern vaccines.

Germ Warfare

Historian Elizabeth Fenn, examining of the history of 18th-century North American warfare, has found that “accusations and discussions of biological warfare were common, and actual incidents may have occurred more frequently than scholars have previously acknowledged”. While most accusations are against the British, there are allegations against the Americans, French, Spanish, and even a handful against Indigenous peoples. The most infamous example is the British attempt to spread smallpox to Indigenous people through infected blankets, at Fort Pitt in present-day Pennsylvania. It is unclear whether the scheme worked. Nevertheless, “even for that time period, it violated civilized notions of war,... [smallpox] kills indiscriminately—it would kill women and children, not just warriors.”²

In Pasteur’s day, the general belief was that disease spread through miasma, or putrid air. In 1857, Pasteur proposed something different: germ theory. Germ theory is the idea that small microorganisms are responsible for disease. Pasteur was not the first person to propose a theory about germs causing diseases. However, he was the first person to demonstrate through replicable experiments that particles in the air—and not the air itself—were the problem.

Koch picked up on Pasteur’s work, and began to isolate and identify particular germs that caused particular diseases. Koch also recognised that antibodies built up our immunity to diseases.

With germs such as rabies, anthrax, and cholera now identified, Pasteur was able to weaken them and inject them into animals. The results of Pasteur’s experiments changed the course of history: if you vaccinated an animal with weakened germs, the animal would develop immunity to that disease. Because humans are animals, the same principle applied.

By discovering how Edward Jenner’s smallpox vaccine worked, Pasteur and Koch paved the way for countless vaccines. Tetanus, typhoid, influenza, measles, mumps, and rubella are just a few diseases we have tamed through vaccines.

Back to Oran

In *The Plague*, Dr. Castel’s serum may be the last hope for halting the disease. But Castel is not starting from nowhere in his attempts to develop a plague serum. Rather, his work built on centuries of knowledge from people and cultures around the world. The history of vaccine development shows us that cooperation, sharing, and the occasional bit of competition all play a role in advancing society. The simple truth is that very few discoveries are the result of the work of a single person, a single time, or a single society.

Discuss

1. English intellectual Francis Galton said “In science, credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not the man to whom the idea first occurs.”³ What does this quote tell us about the role of storytelling in science?
2. People or companies who make new discoveries or innovations can apply to patent their innovations. A patent gives the inventor—and only the inventor—exclusive rights to use and sell their innovation. In Canada, a patent lasts for 20 years.
 - a) Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, declined to patent it. He could have made a great deal of money. Instead, he made it free for anyone to use. How does Salk’s refusal to patent the polio vaccine reflect Dr. Rieux’s point in *The Plague* that “the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency” (136)?
 - b) In *The Plague*, what would be the consequences if Dr. Castel successfully created a plague serum, then patented it?
3. Think about *The Plague*’s allegory of political extremists infecting France. Is there a serum or vaccine for people who fall for these wrong-headed ideas?

¹ Elizabeth A. Fenn. “Biological Warfare in Eighteenth-Century North America: Beyond Jeffery Amhurst.” *Journal of American History*, vol. 86, no. 4, March 2000, p. 1553.

² Paul Kelton quoted in Patrick Kilger. “Did Colonists Give Infected Blankets to Native Americans as Biological Warfare?” *History.com*, 19 November 2019. www.history.com/news/colonists-native-americans-smallpox-blankets

³ quoted in Cary P. Gross and Kent A. Sepkowitz. “The Myth of the Medical Breakthrough: Smallpox, Vaccination, and Jenner Reconsidered.” *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, No. 3, 1998, p. 54.



Health Concepts

Vaccine Hesitancy and the Law

The plague serum given to Othon's son does not save his life. Its main effect is to slightly prolong the boy's life. This suggests that Dr. Castel's serum development is on the right track. Nevertheless, as Father Paneloux points out, using the serum on young Othon ultimately means that "he will have suffered longer" (175), as his death was agonising.

The failure of the serum to work and the agony it causes reminds us that medical science is not always perfect. Fears—justified or not—about imperfections in medicine are a reason why hesitancy and outright opposition to vaccines have always been with us.

The Origins of Vaccine Hesitancy

For as long as there have been vaccines, there have been people who have questions about or are outrightly critical of vaccines. Doctors sometimes call these people vaccine hesitant. In popular culture, they are often called anti-vaxxers. People with vaccine hesitancy exist across society. Their reasons for being hesitant are diverse.



Montreal anti-vaccination riot, September 28th, 1885.

Vaccinations were made mandatory when a smallpox epidemic struck Montreal.

Thousands of French residents claimed it was an English conspiracy and refused to cooperate.

The outbreak left 6,000 people dead and 13,000 disfigured, 90% of them French Canadians.

Criticism of vaccines emerged alongside the introduction of the smallpox vaccine. At the time, medical science had determined that the smallpox vaccine worked. However, medical science did not yet understand how germs caused diseases. This lack of knowledge meant that vaccinations were risky, and performed with unsterilised equipment. Catching a disease from vaccination was a very real possibility.

Because of the risks, people were not wrong to ask questions. After all, the freedom we have in a liberal democracy to offer constructive criticism often works to make things better. That said, smallpox was painful, disfiguring, and often lethal. Most people weighed the risks against the benefits, and determined that vaccination was the best course forward.

Unfortunately, many people were not given a choice about vaccination. In the mid to late 1800s, Ontario, Quebec, England, and many American cities and states created mandatory vaccination laws.

The application of mandatory vaccination laws was often shameful, and minority communities—especially in the United States—frequently received the worst treatment. For example, a smallpox

vaccination raid in New York City's Little Italy neighbourhood saw the police hold men down and vaccinate them against their will, while babies were torn from their mothers' arms and sent to quarantine hospitals. Worse yet, in a Middlesboro Kentucky Black neighbourhood, people were vaccinated at gunpoint.

To many, mandatory vaccination was an overreach of state power, to say nothing of the uneven and cruel implementation. People began to organise and push back.

England Changes Course

In 1898, England recognised that forcing vaccinations upon people may be a violation of their rights. So the country moved towards a different approach to vaccination. To appease people who objected to mandatory vaccination, England added a “conscience clause” to its vaccination laws. The clause was vague, allowing people to be exempt from a vaccine so long as they could convince a magistrate that they had good reason to do so. The law popularised the term conscientious objector and spawned a widespread debate on what it meant to be one.

Conscientious objection took on many forms. Some people objected because of worries about catching diseases from vaccination. Others objected due to fears about vaccine ingredients. Some religious people joined in, concerned about body purity. And people opposed to animal experimentation added to the chorus.

Many of these issues were moral or ethical, and never fully settled. And to be certain, every medical procedure involves some level of risk. Nonetheless, as the 20th century progressed, it became increasingly clear that the benefits of vaccines far outweighed the risks. With almost everybody choosing to be vaccinated, countless dangerous and disfiguring diseases went into decline. No doubt vaccines were not the only factor in the decline of disease. Better sanitation systems, access to more nutritious food, stronger health and labour laws, and other scientific advances played a role. But the impact of vaccines cannot be missed.



1802 cartoon by British satirist James Gillray, showing cows emerging from people given the smallpox vaccine. The cartoon poked fun at the anti-vaxxers of the day who greatly over-exaggerated the risks of the smallpox vaccine.

Vaccine Hesitancy Today

With the horrors of so many diseases now forgotten, space has been created to capture the public imagination with vaccine risks. People no longer see children being disfigured by polio, suffering brain swelling from measles, or experiencing paralysis and death from diphtheria, for example. The result? More and more people are declining vaccines, which is leading to more and more disease outbreaks. This trend has led the World Health Organisation to declare anti-vaccination movements one of 2019's top-ten threats to health.

No single personality trait or fact explains why people embrace vaccine hesitancy today. Just as a member of a small orthodox religious community may be hesitant because they accept the authority of their faith leaders, a member of a small “hippy” town may be hesitant because they reject the authority of government and large pharmaceutical corporations. And just as a member of a

minority community may be hesitant due to a history of unethical, racist medical experiments, a member of an affluent white community may be hesitant because of advice from a fee-based alternative medicine practitioner. Vaccine hesitancy is a complex mix.

Of course, some anti-vaccination beliefs are based in nothing more than conspiracy theories. Most conspiracy theories begin with a grain of truth, then quickly become unhinged from reality. Social media can push along conspiracy theories, as algorithms feed people information they already agree with. Add to that, people often bubble together in echo chambers, where they only hear self-reinforcing arguments from like-minded people. Together, in these increasingly narrow halls of discussion, far-fetched anti-vaxxer claims like “vaccines turn people into 5G antennas” can become some people’s “truth.”

Canadian Law Today

Canada’s vaccination-related laws carry on England’s legacy of conscientious objection. They attempt to balance the need for public health with the desire of some individuals to refuse vaccines.

Some provinces may require children to have certain vaccines in order to attend public school. As well, some health care facilities may require workers to be vaccinated against particular diseases, if they will be performing particular duties. And some vaccines may also be mandatory to enter a foreign country.

People generally may decline vaccinations for medical, religious or philosophical reasons. However, unvaccinated people may not enjoy the same freedoms as vaccinated people. For example, in the event of an outbreak of a particular disease, children who have not been immunised may be required to stay home from school. Similarly, health care workers who refuse a vaccine may face restricted duties in the event of an outbreak.

These are the kinds of compromises that society has agreed upon, when there are no mandatory vaccination laws. We are not required to be vaccinated, but we may have to compromise some of our freedoms if we make this choice.

A Healthy Society

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, vaccines have saved more lives in the past 50 years than any other health intervention. Vaccines—in conjunction with better sanitation, access to more nutritious food, stronger health and labour laws, and other scientific advances—have freed us from many fatal and disfiguring diseases.

That said, just like the dramatic and horrible death of young Othon in *The Plague*, outlier events and sensational stories do occasionally happen. These events tend to stick in our mind and tug at our heart. They evoke our sympathy and compel us to demand better. This is especially true in an age of social media, where a single story can be picked up and amplified unlike any other time in history. However, a single story—no matter how compelling or important—cannot *always* be taken as a wholesale reflection of our collective reality.

Nonetheless, everyone with questions about their health care should discuss them with their health-care provider, to understand the risks and benefits of their medical procedures.

Discuss

1. Of the countless millions of vaccines given in Canada in 2018, only 221 people reported adverse affects, primarily allergic reactions. Why do we seldom tell the stories of the times things go well?
2. The most-discussed ruling on mandatory vaccination came from the United States Supreme Court, in 1905. In *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, the court found that the health interests of the public as a whole—through compulsory smallpox vaccinations—outweighed the individual’s right to decline vaccines. Refusing a vaccine meant disease could spread, and individuals do not have an unfettered right to harm society.
 - a) Do you think this ruling is fair? Why or why not?
 - b) Would you support making COVID-19 vaccines compulsory for everyone? Why or why not?
 - c) Would you support requiring people to have a COVID-19 vaccine if they wished to take part in certain activities? Why or why not?
3. Every medical procedure requires us to put our trust in others. What will happen if we lose our sense of mutual trust?

Part Four • Chapter 4

// instead of
saying 'You'
he now said
'We'. //

(181)

Father Paneloux delivers his second major sermon. In many ways it contrasts his first sermon: he is less certain about the plague's meaning. Nonetheless, Paneloux never abandons his belief in God, even though his faith seems to be shaken.

1. Paneloux engages in “the forefront of the fight” (180) against plague, now experiencing death firsthand. How is this different than Paneloux’s earlier understanding of death?
2. Pamphlets spouting utter nonsense about the plague begin to circulate throughout Oran, amplified by local printing firms who were “quick to realize the profit to be made by pandering to this new craze” (181).
 - a) What kinds of things are being written?
 - b) How does this reflect the spread of misinformation on digital platforms today?
3. Less people attend Paneloux’s second sermon than the first.
 - a) What reasons are given?
 - b) Can you think of other reasons why attendance is down?
4. Find a passage in the sermon you find significant, and discuss its meaning.
5. Following the sermon, an older priest says that “At Paneloux’s age, a priest had no business to feel uneasy” (187). What do you think? Should we become more certain of our beliefs as we age? Less certain? Think back to Camus’ idea of absurdism to help guide your thoughts.
6.
 - a) Why would Paneloux refuse medical attention as he was dying?
 - b) Paneloux’s illness is a “doubtful case” of plague. If Paneloux didn’t die of plague, what did he die of?



Part Four • Chapter 5

The plague reaches its peak. Life in Oran at this moment is examined, followed by a look into an isolation camp.

// poor
families
were in
great
straights,
while the
rich went
short of
practically
nothing. //

(194)

1. Read the description of life in Oran during the plague's peak, in the opening pages of the chapter. How is this experience similar and different to the peak days of the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. The president of the isolation camp tells Tarrou "We're great believers in efficiency in this camp" (198).
 - a) Why does he say this?
 - b) Is efficiency always a good thing?





Historical Context

World War II Internment Camps

In Part Four Chapter 5 of *The Plague*, Tarrou and Rambert tour an isolation camp. The camp is where citizens who may be contagious with *Y. pestis* are housed. Formerly a sports field, the isolation camp could be seen as an allegory for France's World War II internment camps.

France had about 60 permanent and countless temporary internment camps during the war. The camps were located both in France and France's African colonies. At the beginning of the war, these camps mainly held German prisoners. When Germany defeated France in 1940, the camps became places to hold Jews, Roma, communists, Resistance fighters, and other enemies or targets of the Vichy Regime.

When Germany was chased out of France, the camps were repurposed to once again hold German prisoners. But the end of the war did not bring about the end of the camps. When France went to war in northern Africa in 1954, trying to hold on to its colonial possessions, France used internment camps to hold independence fighters, and later interned large portions of the rural north African population.

Internment camps are a feature of war, and by no means was France the only country with them in World War II. Just as Germany and its allies created some 44,000 permanent and temporary camps, Britain and its allies—including Canada—built their own camps.

Some internment camps were built from scratch. But the necessities of war meant that time and supplies were limited. Hence, other camps were created out of existing buildings. Sports complexes, like Oran's isolation camp in *The Plague*, were sometimes used because they could be quickly and efficiently converted.



Interior of the Vél d'Hiv, 1911. The glass-ceilinged racing track and stadium stood for half a century, until its demolition in 1959.

The Vél d'Hiv Roundup

One particular Paris sports complex, the Vélodrome d'Hiver or Vél d'Hiv for short, found frequent use as a temporary internment camp during World War II. At the outbreak, France interned German refugees in the Vél d'Hiv. In 1940, the complex held foreign women. In 1941, it housed Jews rounded up by French police. Then, in 1942, it was used for France's largest single mass arrest and deportation of Jews. This notorious event is known as the Vél d'Hiv roundup.

The Vél d'Hiv roundup took place on July 16th and 17th, 1942. At Germany's behest, Paris police arrested over 13,000 Jews, including 4,000 children. Almost all were foreign-born residents, or stateless refugees who had fled from persecution in other countries.

About 6,000 people were immediately sent to Drancy, a Jewish internment camp on the edge of Paris. The other 7,000-8,000 were squeezed into the Vél d'Hiv.

Vél d'Hiv was no place to house humans. Windows were screwed shut to prevent escape. Half of the bathrooms were locked, the other half out of commission. Aside from one water tap, food and water was not provided by the French: instead Quakers arrived to supply the captives. In the words of one eyewitness:

It was like hell, like something that takes you by the throat and keeps you from crying out. I will try to describe this spectacle, but multiply by a thousand what you imagine, and then you will only have part of the truth. On entering, your breath is cut by the stinking air, and you find before you an arena black with people crowded next to each other, clasp small packages [of clothes, belongings, food]. The scarce toilets are blocked. No one can fix them. Each is obliged to do his or her business along the walls, in public. On the ground floor are the ill, with full waste containers next to them, for there aren't enough people to empty them. And no water...'

For nearly a week, Jews suffered in the stagnant sports complex. Some committed suicide. Others tried to escape and were shot.

The Jews incarcerated in the Vél d'Hiv were next moved to transit camps. Transit camps were a kind of purgatory, holding people prior to their deportation to Germany's extermination camps. In the end, almost every person arrested in the Vél d'Hiv roundup was killed at Auschwitz.

For years, France refused to take responsibility for the Vél d'Hiv roundup. The official position was that the French Republic was dismantled in 1940, and replaced by the illegitimate French State (Vichy France). However, in 1995 France's president reversed that position, acknowledging this horror was committed by France.

It Can't Happen Here?

The mass arrests, incarcerations, and deportations of Jews in France during World War II were completely inhumane. We like to think of such gross injustices as historical artifacts, at least for western liberal democracies like Canada. In many ways, this is true. As we have advanced as a society, Canadians have rejected such actions, and enshrined human rights through such laws as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

However, Canada has its own history of injustices. This includes internment camps during both world wars. Some of Canada's camps were understandable. For example, several camps were set up to house enemy soldiers—mostly German—who were captured in Europe. In total, 34,000 were held in Canada for the duration of the war. Canada followed the rules of the Geneva Convention, standards in international law for how prisoners of war should be treated. The prisoners were returned to Germany at the war's close. Perhaps reflecting the respectful treatment Canadians gave to the German prisoners, many former captives immigrated to Canada in the years that followed.

A more questionable internment that took place in Canada was the housing of 2,300 foreign-born Jewish men and boys. In the early days of World War II, there was panic in Britain about the political allegiance of some Jewish European refugees living there. Britain struck a secret agreement to deport several thousand to Canada. The idea was that they couldn't undermine the war effort if they were interned so far away from the battlefield.

Fortunately, the people who ran Canada's internment camps quickly realised these refugees were no danger. They were given considerable freedoms, such as being allowed to practice their religion, and setting up classes—often taught by visiting university professors—to help build a path for their integration into Canada. For the most part, these prisoners of war did not come to resent their experience. While their experience was far from ideal, many held some gratitude that the British and Canadians, by not deporting them to their countries of origin, saved them from the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe.

Canada also used internment camps to hold its own citizens. These camps raise many concerns.

The federal government had sweeping powers under the *War Measures Act*, a law passed with the outbreak of World War I. The *War Measures Act* could be activated during wars, invasions, or insurrections. Under the law, the state could censor or ban publications, seize private property, take over transportation, trade and manufacturing sectors of the economy, and intern or deport people for most any reason.

During World War II, a handful of communists and fascists found themselves interned. This includes Montreal's fascist-sympathising mayor, who was also outspoken in his opposition to conscripting soldiers to join the battle.

Italian and German Canadians were not treated especially well under this law during the war. Thousands had to register with the government, for fears they would be conspiring with the enemy. About 850 Canadians of German descent and 500 Canadians of Italian descent were interned. In addition, Canada interned another 100 Italian sailors who by circumstance found themselves here when Italy declared war. While some believe that the government had reason to be concerned—at least 100 of the internees

were card-carrying members of the Italian Fascist Party—none of the people interned were ever charged with a crime. This brings into question what right Canada had to suspend their civil liberties. In 2021, the federal government issued a formal apology for its actions against Italian Canadians during the war.

More shameful was our internment of over 20,000 Canadians of Japanese descent. Japanese people living near the British Columbia coast were rounded up, and their possessions were confiscated. Most were placed in ghost-towns-turned-camps in the Kootenay Mountains. Others were put to work on prairie sugar beet plantations.

Following the war, they were released and encouraged to move to Japan. 4,000 were involuntarily deported. Not one of these people was ever charged with a crime against Canada. Following years of demands, in 1988 the government issued a formal apology. Those interned were provided reparation payments for their property that was taken and never returned.



Japanese-Canadian internment camp at Lemon Creek, British Columbia, 1945.

Conditions at the camps were initially poor, but slowly improved as the occupants made demands upon the government.

The Arc of Progress

Canada behaved more responsibly with World War II internments than many other countries. The camps more closely resembled Oran's fictional camp than, say, the Vél d'Hiv. Nonetheless, especially as the Japanese experience reminds us, Canada was far from perfect.

Recognising that the *War Measures Act* was an overreach of state power, and allowed for the creation of such camps, in 1988 it was replaced by the *Emergency Act*. The new law rolled back many of the *War Measures Act*'s draconian powers. This reflects how, as our values evolve, so do our laws. Just as Martin Luther King Jr said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

That said, the moral universe will only continue bending towards justice if we learn from the mistakes of the past, and demand changes accordingly.

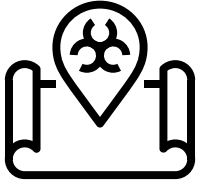
Discuss

1. In *The Plague*, *Y. pestis* is broadly meant to be an allegory for Nazis and their sympathisers. Oran's internment camp houses people suspected of being infected with *Y. pestis*.
 - a) In what ways does Oran's internment camp resemble and differ from camps in Vichy France?
 - b) In what ways does it resemble and differ from camps in Canada?

You may wish to look more deeply into France and Canada's World War II internment camps to answer these questions.

2. Camus' depiction of Oran's isolation camp reflects much about the life of a camp prisoner. But it does not reflect the worst of Vichy France's internment camps. Why would this be?
3. Why should we be careful to understand the limits of an allegory?

¹ quoted in Ronald C Rossbottom. *When Paris Went Dark: The City of Light Under Occupation, 1940-1944*. Back Bay Books, 2014, pp. 279-280.



Think Local

Pandemics and Prisons

Pandemics have curious ways of reminding us that while we are progressing as a society, some injustices still remain. Consider some of the injustices that prisoners face in *The Plague*. Recall that in Part Three Chapter 1, we learn how the disease is especially deadly for people in prison, partly because prison conditions make it impossible to socially distance. And in Part Four Chapter 5, Tarrou writes that for the people interned in Oran's quarantine camps, "worst of all... is that they're forgotten, and they know it" (197).

Advocates of prisoner rights have shown how similar conditions exist for many incarcerated people today. When COVID-19 worked its way into prisons, it proved exceptionally contagious. Fortunately, through the work of journalists and prisoner rights advocates, some attention has been given to these conditions. However, awareness is only one step. The federal and provincial governments have not yet undertaken comprehensive prison condition reforms.

COVID-19 in Saskatchewan prisons

When the COVID-19 pandemic set in, the justice system took steps to lower the prison population. As legal scholar John Fabian Witt points out, "not one person in the prison system had been sentenced to be involuntarily exposed to a potentially deadly infectious disease." It would be inhumane and unjust to knowingly put people at a heightened risk of catching COVID-19.

Lowering the prison population is a complex task. People cannot simply be released from prison on a whim. Instead, the justice system used tools at its disposal to lower prison populations. When the pandemic set in, steps to lower the prison population included:

Provincial and Federal Prisons

Provincial correctional centres are used for less serious crimes. Inmates are serving sentences of two years or less. As well, they hold people on remand. Remand is when somebody is imprisoned while awaiting trial. Federal institutions house inmates serving sentences over two years.

- Remand was used less often. Instead, some people awaiting trial were allowed to remain in their community, often with conditions on their freedom attached.
- Sentencing became more creative. For example, some people found guilty of less serious crimes were able to serve their sentences at home.
- The Federal Minister of Public Safety encouraged Correctional Services Canada and the Parole Board of Canada to consider early release for low-risk offenders.

Broadly, these moves worked to lower prison populations. In Saskatchewan, prison populations were below long-term averages for most of 2020.

While these measures reduced prison populations, they could not stop COVID-19 from making its way into prisons. Once inside, the disease quickly spread.

For example, on December 12th, 2020, a COVID-19 outbreak was declared at Saskatchewan Penitentiary, a federal prison in Prince Albert. By January 12th, a total of 244 cases had been recorded in the facility, and one prisoner died. Given that the prison has a maximum capacity of just under 600 people, this is an astonishingly high infection rate.

The spread of COVID-19 in prisons can be partly understood as a consequence of the inability for prisoners to maintain safe distances apart. There is simply not much personal space in prisons, and not enough room to separate everyone who is infected from everyone who is not. Prisoner advocate Sherri Maier told the CBC that in Saskatchewan's provincial prisons, healthy inmates were being housed in units where other inmates had COVID-19.

Social distancing was only one of several challenges that prisoners faced. Maier also worried about access to soap and hot water in Saskatchewan's provincial prisons. In a letter to Saskatchewan's Office of the Correctional Investigator, she pointed out that "Their washrooms have no hand soap and there is hardly any hot water."³

The availability of masks was also a problem. In November 2020, the CBC reported that the Regina Correctional Centre was only supplying masks for staff. As an inmate said:

There's boxes of [masks] in the office for the staff members. Quite a few people have attempted to say, 'Can I have one of those?' And the answer is always, 'No, you're not allowed those.'⁴

One inmate was given a mask by a kitchen staff member, only to have it taken away by a corrections officer.

Policies were put in place to reduce social contact between prisoners. This led to social distancing but also created extreme isolation. Prisoners often received only 30 minutes outside, every second day. This added to the mental stress of inmates. Pierre Hawkins, a lawyer for the prisoner rights organisation The John Howard Society of Saskatchewan, remarked that

We have a population here that disproportionately suffers, not only from mental health issues, but also from a physical vulnerability to complications from the virus. So you can understand why, that while on lock down with very few things to do, that people just sort of sit and worry and tensions, understandably, build a little bit.⁵

The prisoners were not the only ones feeling the tension. James Bloomfield, the prairie region president for the Union of Canadian Correctional Officers, said that

As more [COVID-19] cases come in, the more mental strain that is on that staff on top of all the normality that goes with their job, which is a wild environment to say the least.⁶



Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre. In January 2021, many prisoners staged a hunger strike to protest their conditions. Cory Cardinal, the prisoner justice advocate who was incarcerated here at the time, powerfully pointed out that "this system is rooted in a dominant mainstream society voter-base that has, over 154 years, cultivated prejudiced values to elect a biased government that has reduced us to surviving on watered-down peanut butter sandwiches."²

Because the people who work in prisons are also in the community, out-of-control disease outbreaks in prison can easily spread back into the community. One study by the Prison Policy Initiative found that COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons were correlated with subsequent community outbreaks. Prison walls are no barrier to COVID-19.

Representatives from both federal and provincial jails have said they have adapted measures to keep prisoners safe. The deputy warden of the Saskatchewan Penitentiary told the CBC that

There are a variety of safety protocols in place [from] intensive screening at the front of the institution when people are entering it, from temperature checks to proper PPE, there's significant cleaning.⁷

As well, a spokesperson for the provincial government noted that the measures being taken to keep prisons as safe as possible have “evolved”⁸. Nonetheless, prisoners and their advocates insist that much more must be done.

Justice and Well-Being

For some people, it is easy to think that people in prison need not be treated well because they committed a crime. However, the people who go into a prison will one day be reintegrated into the community. This means that the long-term well-being of a community and a society depends upon prison being a place of rehabilitation, not just a place of punishment. This is a reason why Saskatchewan's provincial jails are called “correctional” centres, not “punishment” centres.

That said, there is only so much that courts and prison administrators can do about prison conditions. Courts sentence people in accordance with the laws created by governments. Prisons carry out their responsibilities with the resources given to them by governments.

Put another way, just as prisoner advocate Cory Cardinal reminded us, prison conditions are a consequence of political choices: we elect governments, and they create our justice system. Substantial changes to prison conditions can only happen if enough citizens demand that governments make changes.

Discuss

1. An open letter about prison conditions and COVID-19 was written to Saskatchewan's Minister of Corrections and Public Safety. Signed by hundreds, it read in part:

This lack of action and responsibility bespeaks a situation of unconscionable indifference to the health and well-being of people in custody.⁹

Do you agree with this statement? If so, what can be done?

2. Some people have suggested that prisoners should be at the “back of the line” for COVID-19 vaccinations. Is this justice?

3. Look back to your conception of justice, from the handout **Justice, Not Hatred**.
- a) Is your conception of justice compatible with prison conditions?
 - b) What ways could you help create change in the correctional system?

To help answer these questions, check out other articles on the state of Canada's prisons.

Good starting points include:

- the *Maclean's* article "Houses of hate: How Canada's prison system is broken." Find it at www.macleans.ca/news/canada/houses-of-hate-how-canadas-prison-system-is-broken/
- the John Howard Society of Saskatchewan's podcast *Know Justice*. The podcast features inmate voices. Find it wherever you listen to podcasts.
- the CBC article "Prisoner advocate Cory Cardinal says much work to be done at Sask. jails." Find it at www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/cory-cardinal-released-1.5979764

As well, check out the references listed below.

- ¹ John Fabian Witt. *American Contagions: Epidemics and the Law from Smallpox to COVID-19*. Yale University Press, 2020, p. 124.
- ² Cory Charles Cardinal. "A letter from the organizer of the Sask. prisoners' hunger strike" Briarpatch, January 4 2021. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/saskdispatch/view/saskatchewan-prisoner-hunger-strike-COVID-19>
- ³ quoted in Dan Zakreski. "Known active COVID-19 cases at Prince Albert jail jump over 3-day span." CBC News, December 22, 2020. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/prince-albert-jail-covid-double-1.5851538
- ⁴ "Sask. Ministry of Corrections trying to get masks for inmates: spokesperson." CBC News, November 20, 2020. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/saskatchewan-justice-corrections-covid-19-masks-1.5810316
- ⁵ quoted in Morgan Modjeski. "Sask. Pen inmate who died from COVID-19 remembered for his laugh and being protective of family." CBC News, January 15, 2021. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/sask-pen-inmate-who-died-from-covid-19-remembered-for-his-laugh-and-being-protective-of-family-1.5873688
- ⁶ quoted in Morgan Modjeski. "Inmates 'think this is like a death sentence,' advocate says of COVID-19 outbreak at Sask. Penitentiary." CBC News, December 20, 2020. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/covid-19-outbreak-sask-pen-1.5849059
- ⁷ quoted in Jennifer Francis. "COVID-19 outbreak at Sask. Penitentiary sparks mental health concerns." CBC News, January 3, 2021. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/covid-19-outbreak-penitentiary-sparks-mental-health-concerns-1.5859796
- ⁸ quoted in Thia James. "Saskatoon jail, close to no active cases of COVID-19, reopens to new admissions." *The StarPhoenix*, January 9, 2021. <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/saskatoon-jail-close-to-no-active-cases-of-covid-19-reopens-to-new-admissions>
- ⁹ "Open Letter in Solidarity with Prisoners at the Saskatchewan Correctional Centres." December, 2020. <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeCuYtyt19AfCtOJTgMrqzuteAUobogNXFycsidAcdZZMuzOA/viewform>

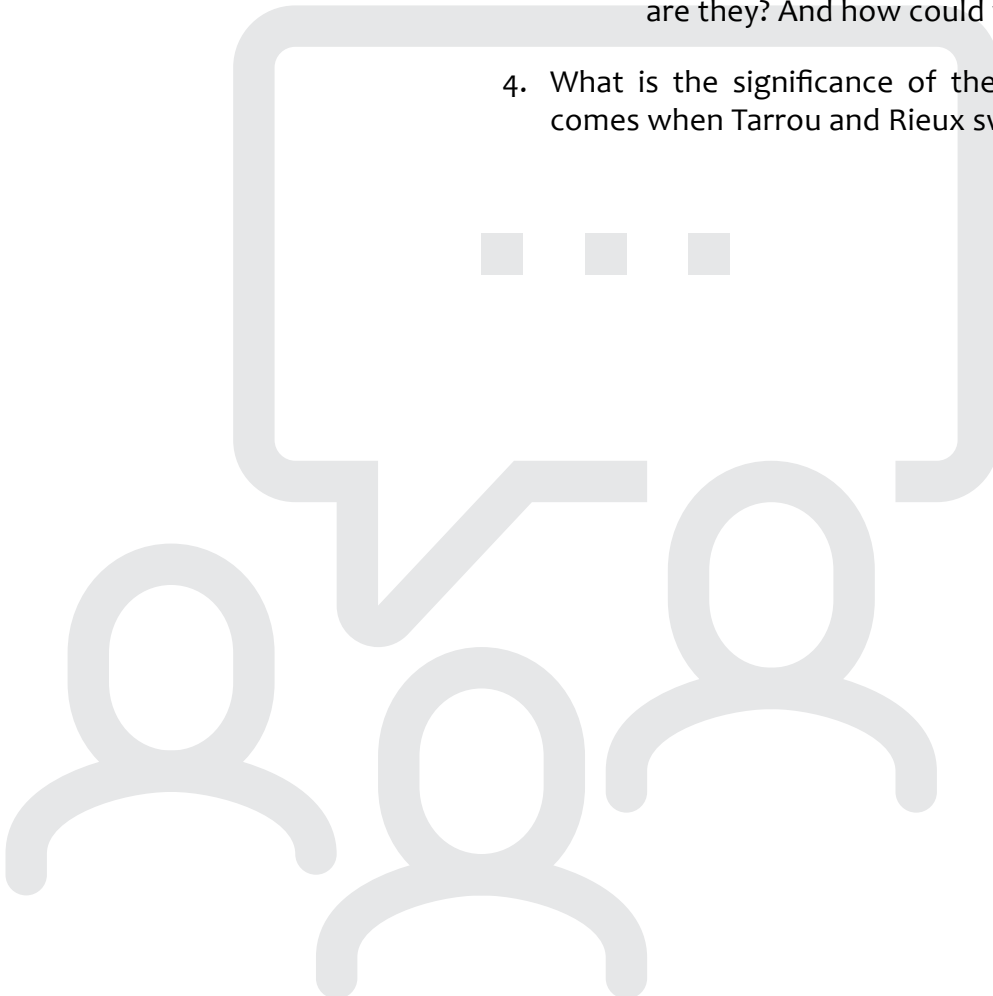
Part Four • Chapter 6

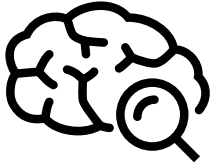
// On this earth
there are
pestilences
and there
are victims,
and it's up
to us, so far
as possible,
not to
join forces
with the
pestilences //

(207)

Rieux and Tarrou visit an old asthma patient. He tells the story of how he once caught plague without realising it, reminding the men of how sneaky the disease can be.

1. Rieux's old asthma patient remarks that people are getting fed up, and the situation could not go on forever.
 - a) How does this statement apply to the plague?
 - b) How does this statement apply to people under occupation or oppression?
2. The asthma patient says that "When I was young I lived with the idea of my innocence; that is to say, with no idea at all" (201). Is this a fair statement about youth?
3. The patient says that he sides with the victim, because to be a "true healer" (208) is difficult and rare.
 - a) What is a "true healer"?
 - b) Are there any "true healers" in *The Plague*? If not, why would Camus not include one?
 - c) Are there any "true healers" in our society? If so, who are they? And how could we help create more of them?
4. What is the significance of the unexpected cold current that comes when Tarrou and Rieux swim in the ocean?





The Philosophy of Camus

The Death Penalty

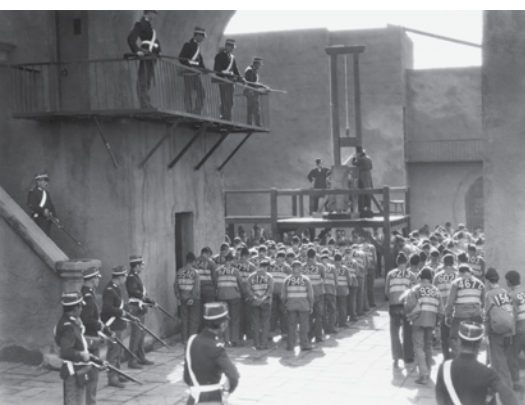
In *The Plague*, Tarrou says “my real interest in life was the death penalty” (204). The death penalty—sometimes called capital punishment—is when the state kills someone as punishment for a crime.

Tarrou’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 generally decent man—was “clamouring for the prisoner’s death” (203). 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” (205).

Tarrou’s views on the death penalty 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 Tarrou’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. (206)

His life 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 could believe in any justification for the death penalty.



In this undated photo, prisoners prepare for execution by guillotine.

France used the guillotine for many of its executions until 1981.

Tarrou had much in common with Albert Camus. Camus spent much of his adult life opposing the death penalty. This opposition appeared in his works of fiction and non-fiction. In addition to Tarrou’s story in *The Plague*, Camus’ breakthrough novel *The Stranger* raises questions about the death penalty. More pointedly, in 1957 he wrote the essay “Reflections on the Guillotine,” a passionate and well-researched argument for ending the death penalty.

Camus’ opposition to the death penalty began early in his life. As a young boy in Algeria, Camus learned a story 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 story of his father sickened by the death penalty founded Camus’ basis for opposing it. However, there was a brief time, at the close of the war, when his opposition to the death penalty wavered.

France 1944: From Wild Purge to Legal Purge

The Nazis were pushed out of France during the summer of 1944. As Nazi authority collapsed, the country was briefly left without its own government and justice system. Charles de Gaulle's Free French government did not begin to establish its authority until late August. In the days between Nazi authority and Free French Authority, the *épuration sauvage* (Wild Purge) unfolded.

The Wild Purge was a time of no French government or French law to deal with the country's Nazi collaborators. While Allied occupying armies were technically in control, in the absence of organised justice, mob chaos often ensued. French women who had relationships with German soldiers had their heads shaven and were publicly marched in the streets. Suspected Vichy collaborators were rounded up by the French Forces of the Interior and herded into prison camps, including locations like the notorious Vél d'Hiv. Sometimes, angry mobs simply killed people. In total, an estimated 1,600 people lost their lives in the Wild Purge. While some of the victims were amongst France's most odious Nazi collaborators, the fact remains that what unfolded was revenge. There were no courts and no due process to hear out the accused.

By September, de Gaulle began instituting court processes to tame the mob justice. This began a new era, known as the *épuration légale* (Legal Purge). The Legal Purge was France's way of dealing with its citizen-collaborators. By 1951, some 300,000 people were charged with crimes. About 50,000 received sentences of "national degradation." 6,763 people were sentenced to death. Only 791 of these death sentences were carried out. Marshal Pétain was one of the Vichy leaders sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted.

Camus Wavers

As France was returned to French hands, Camus believed that mercy should not be given to Nazi collaborators. Their horrible crimes justified their punishments and executions. On October 20th, 1944, he made this argument in the pages of *Combat*, the Resistance newspaper he edited from 1943 – 1947. While he denounced random executions on the streets, he spoke in favour of Legal Purge executions:

It is our conviction that there are times when we must silence our feelings and renounce our peace of mind. Ours is such a time, and its terrible law, with which it is futile to argue, forces us to destroy a living part of our country in order that we may save its very soul.¹

This acceptance of death as punishment was a marked change in Camus' lifelong belief about the death penalty.

Other public figures in France, including famed French writer and Resistance member François Mauriac, believed that many of Vichy's collaborators should be shown some mercy. Mauriac worried that liberated France, in its eagerness to execute its enemies, was becoming what it had set out to defeat. He wrote

We aspire to be something better than a nation trading off the roles of executioner and victim. At no price must the Fourth Republic wear the Gestapo's boots.²

Mauriac was not defending the collaborator's past actions. Rather, he was saying that for France to heal, the cycle of death had to stop.

Camus and Mauriac sparred back and forth on the issue until January 1945. In a *Combat* editorial "The Purge has Gone Too Far," Camus lamented the excesses of revenge unfolding in France. He did not renounce his earlier belief that some people deserved execution for their crimes during the war. However, he now believed that justice was belated, and its implementation was inconsistent. It was time to move on from executions.

Does the Death Penalty Work?

Moral arguments aside, opponents of the death penalty point out that it has several practical flaws.

Research shows that the death penalty does not work as a deterrent: it does very little—if anything—to reduce murder rates. More disturbingly, in several American cases where a person was sentenced to death, evidence emerged that proved the person innocent, *after* they were executed.

At this juncture in his life, Camus was becoming mentally and physically exhausted. He took a brief leave of absence from *Combat*, and began to shift away from writing explicitly political thought pieces as he came to understand that we cannot let politics consume every aspect of our lives. Though he considered writing a book about collaborators and the death penalty, he instead pivoted back to finishing *The Plague*.

Discuss

1. Reconsider Tarrou's statement about the need for the death penalty, in light of the complexities facing France following World War II.

But I was told that these few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a new world in which murder would cease to be. That was also true up to a point – and maybe I'm not capable of standing fast where that order of truths is concerned. (205)

How does this reflect Camus' changing beliefs about the death penalty in post-Vichy France?

2. Look back at the beginning of Part Two Chapter 8. Think about this passage, especially the boldfaced part:

On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; **the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance which fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill.** The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness. (110)

Does anyone—including anyone in the criminal justice system—have the right to kill another person?

3. Reconsider François Mauriac's statement about justice in post-Vichy France:

We aspire to be something better than a nation trading off the roles of executioner and victim. At no price must the Fourth Republic wear the Gestapo's boots.

Do movements sometimes become what they set out to defeat?

4. Should justice be swift? Or should justice be slow and measured?
5. How can we best address injustices that happened in the not-recent past?

¹ "Response to Mauriac in defense of the purge." *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944–1947*. Selected and translated by Alexandre de Gramont. Wesleyan University Press, 1991, p. 68.

² quoted in Robert Zaretsky. *Albert Camus: Elements of a Life*. Cornell University Press, 2010, p. 66.

Part Four • Chapter 7

// always
there comes
an hour
when one
is weary
of prisons,
of one's
work, and
of devotion
to duty,
and all one
craves for
is a loved
face, the
warmth and
wonder of
a loving
heart //

(207)

Plague is mostly appearing in pneumonic form, but patients are eager to fight it off. Grand nearly succumbs to the disease, beginning a trend of quick recoveries.

1. Why does M. Othon decide to return to the isolation camp?
2. What is contained in Grand's fifty pages of manuscript? What does this tell us about the need to not get too hung up on things?
3. Why would Grand ask that his manuscript be burned?





The Plague: Part Five



Part Five of *The Plague* chronicles the decline and end of plague in Oran.

There are two stand-alone activities in this section that can help meet Saskatchewan's English B30 curriculum indicators.

- **Historical Context: The Liberation of France** deepens the historical and political context of *The Plague*.
- **Historical Context: Denying Vichy and Creating the Fourth Republic** builds on ideas about the scientific method, as well as deepening understanding of the medical science behind the book.

These activities close out the guided path for understanding *The Plague*, and provide the final pieces to help approach the **Post-Reading Concepts to Consider**.

Part Five • Chapter 1

// destruction
is an
easier,
speedier
process
than
reconstruction //

(218)

The plague begins to retreat from Oran, though not before taking Othon's life. At this point, plague is mostly appearing in pneumonic form—its most virulent. However, patients such as Grand are eager to fight it off.

1. In the waning days of the plague, the people of Oran fluctuate between high optimism and extreme depression. Describe the disease's retreat. Is it a clear and steady trend?
2. The Medical Board declares the plague to be "definitely stemmed" (221). Why would the authorities still keep the town gates closed for two weeks and the strict measures in place for a month?
3. How is the decline of the disease a "Liberation" (222)? Can we be free if disease is allowed to ravage through society, unchecked?





Historical Context

The Liberation of France

Part Five Chapter 1 of *The Plague* is an allegory. The decline of plague in Oran represents the Nazis being driven out of France. More specifically, the chapter is comparable to the Nazi eviction from Paris.

Paris was returned to French hands on August 25th, 1944. On that day, the German forces in the city surrendered. Charles de Gaulle then famously proclaimed in a speech at Paris' city hall, the Hôtel de Ville:

Paris! Paris humiliated! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But now Paris liberated! Liberated by herself, by her own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France.

As de Gaulle's words point out, liberation did not come about from a single military push. Rather, it was the end result of much work, by both the Allied armies and the Resistance on the ground, who had the support of the French people.

The Nazi Retreat

Paris was freed from Nazi rule nearly three months after D-Day, June 6th, 1944. D-Day was the moment that the Allies began their push into metropolitan France. Over 150,000 British, Canadian, and American troops stormed the beaches of Normandy, on the English Channel. A second front opened on France's Mediterranean shores on August 15th, with the landing in Provence of another 100,000 soldiers, including de Gaulle's Free French army.

The Allied battle plan was to drive the Nazis back into Germany as quickly as possible. This plan meant they would bypass Paris. A diversion into the city would slow their progress and prolong the war: troops would be tied up with urban warfare, and once they took the city they would become responsible for feeding and fuelling a city of millions, resources that would otherwise power their armies. Besides, only about 20,000 German troops were in the city, mostly de-motivated reservists. Allied commanders believed that Paris could remain a militarily-weak German island, to be returned to later.

However, Paris was strategically important. Hitler knew this well. He said two days before its liberation that "Historically, the loss of Paris always meant the loss of France."

Charles de Gaulle also knew this well. He believed that Paris must be taken by the Allies, and not just for symbolic reasons. German authority in the city was weak, leaving Paris on the brink of a civil war. French Communists, in particular, had hopes of taking control of the city, and using it as a power base to turn France into a communist state. De Gaulle was willing to cooperate with communists in France's government-in-exile, but he was opposed to communist control of the country.

On August 21st, De Gaulle convinced Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces in Western Europe, that a diversion into Paris was necessary. Eisenhower, who lived in Paris following the

first World War, understood the role that Paris played in the French psyche: whoever controlled Paris controlled France. Eisenhower pointed out to his superiors that Nazi-held Paris would be a “constant menace to our flank.”² A day later, he received the go-ahead from the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff to take back the city.

French and American armies were nearby, and were immediately turned towards Paris. Upon their arrival on the 24th, the German general running the city, Dietrich von Choltitz, knew the war was already lost. Paris was surrendered to the Allies on August 25th.

The Nazi ouster from Paris marked the symbolic return of all of France to the French. Even though small pockets of Nazi forces could be found in France right up until World War II ended, after August 25th there was no question of who controlled France.

Nonetheless, this shift of control in France would not have happened—or at least would not have unfolded as quickly as it did—without the work of the French Resistance.



Dietrich von Choltitz signing the Paris surrender agreement, August 25th, 1944. Two days earlier, Hitler had ordered him to destroy the city. Von Choltitz was horrified by the idea, and used lies and manipulation to put off the command.

The Resistance Comes Out of the Shadows

Just as it says in *The Plague*, France was long harbouring “shadowy, half-hearted hopes” (219) of knocking back the Germans. Lurking in the shadows was the French Resistance. When the Allies landed in Normandy, the Resistance began to move into the light. As historian Robert Gildea notes, “D-Day was the signal for thousands of young French people to come out of the shadows and take to the *maquis* [Resistance fighters].”³

The emergence of the Resistance in Metropolitan France could be said to have begun a day earlier, on June 5th. That day, the BBC broadcast coded instructions across France to the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* (FFI, the official Resistance organisation). The FFI was instructed to initiate the Green Plan (sabotage railways), the Tortoise Plan (sabotage roads), and the Purple Plan (sabotage telecommunications). As well, guerilla warfare against the Nazis was to begin.

The FFI, along with other independent resistance forces, went to work. But they did not always operate efficiently or with clear control. Recall that people of different backgrounds and beliefs made up the resistance. This led to some disagreements and feuds. Countless independent resistance groups simply marched to their own drum. The disarray resulted in many failures in the first weeks of their open fight against the Nazis.

Further complicating resistance efforts were Allied concerns about some FFI leaders. Many high-ranking FFI officials—including the FFI commander in Paris—were communists. This sometimes left the Allies leery of supplying them with weapons, for fears the weapons would be used in a communist revolution.

Even if the resistance was short of ammunition, it was not short of spirit. And as the war turned, so too did resistance fortunes. Much like how “Castel’s anti-plague injections scored frequent success” (219), the resistance started to score frequent success, especially in Paris. A watershed moment happened on July 1st, when thousands of protesters—many of them women—took to the street to demand more food. The Nazis recognised that they were losing their grip on power, and did little to quell the protests.

On Bastille Day—France’s July 14th national holiday—hundreds more came out to protest in Paris’s working class suburbs, the areas of the city where the communists had the most support. This time the Germans took hostages to stop the protests from spreading.

By August 10th, widespread strikes broke out in vital industries. Workers demanded more food, more pay, and the release of hostages. As well, railway strikes hindered Nazi efforts to move their armies around France. Paris police also went on strike, switching sides and taking the Paris police headquarters back from the Nazis.

By August 19th, the FFI launched a general insurrection in Paris. The general insurrection began a week of fierce fighting. The FFI had enormous success in taking back public buildings from the Nazis.

At this point it was clear that the Allied armies were close to the city. Paris was the transportation hub of all of France, and retreating Nazis were passing through the city. To slow their progress, many streets were barricaded, especially in working-class neighbourhoods. Watching Nazis flee through Paris created an atmosphere that oddly mirrored their 1940 arrival. In this sense, just like it says in *The Plague*, “The disease seemed to be leaving as unaccountably as it had come” (219).

As the fighting in Paris intensified, the Free French government-in-exile in Algiers feared that the communists could use the chaos to launch an all-out revolutionary battle. A fragile ceasefire between the FFI and the Nazis was negotiated on the 20th, but it was not fully accepted by all resisters, especially breakaway communists with an eye towards revolution.



Resisters fight with arms taken from the Germans in Paris, August 1944.

By the evening of August 23rd, Allied armies had Paris in their sight. At de Gaulle’s insistence, the French and not the Americans would be the first to march into Paris. The arrival of the French army would assert the authority of the Free French government. A few emissaries were first sent into the city, followed by the army who began rolling into Paris on the night of the 24th.

Aside from a few fierce battles on the morning of the 25th, there was relatively little German opposition. No doubt the efforts by the Resistance to destabilise Paris and take back parts of it from the Nazis made the Allied effort easier. Von Choltitz quickly surrendered, and de Gaulle made his famous liberation speech on the evening of August 25th.

De Gaulle’s well-received speech—along with his visits to the police headquarters and the National Council of the Resistance—established the Free French government’s authority in Paris, and by extension across all of France.



Warsaw's Old Town Market, 1945, following the Nazi destruction of the entire city.

Why was France's Second Armoured Division chosen to liberate Paris?

The choice was the result of many complex considerations, including its respected leader Philippe LeClerc. That said, modern European historian Lauren Henry has noted that its racial make-up may have played a role. France's armies were racially diverse, with many soldiers from France's African colonies.

The Second Division, however, was its least-diverse unit. Henry says that "historians have speculated that U.S. officials may have been concerned about how the American public would react to newsreel footage of the liberation of Paris that showed racially integrated troops."⁴

With Paris back in French hands, several days of celebration began. Yet, the battle was not quite over. Just as *The Plague* discusses the disease's "bursts of activity for two or three days in some districts" (219), Paris was not immediately purged of all Nazis and their collaborators. In the days that followed, a few skirmishes broke out, attempts were made on de Gaulle's life, and Hitler launched an air attack on the city. Nonetheless, on August 25th, 1944, Paris was once again French.

Back to Oran

For all the horrors Paris experienced in World War II, many other cities and their inhabitants fared even worse. Within France, several towns and cities were completely destroyed by war. Outside of France, many major cities were blown to pieces. For example, the Nazis almost completely demolished central Rotterdam in 1940, damaged or destroyed all but 11 buildings in the Crimean city of Sevastopol in 1942, and blew up about 85% of Warsaw in late 1944. And this is to say nothing of the thousands upon thousands of lives lost. In Warsaw alone, the 1944 uprising left more people dead than the atomic blasts did in Japan.

None of this is meant to minimise the terrible experiences in Paris during World War II. The Paris liberation alone cost the lives of about 500-2,000 civilians, 1,000 Resistance fighters, and 100 French troops. But Paris was more fortunate than other cities in that its buildings, structures, and monuments were not heavily damaged during the occupation or liberation.

Really, the only sustained effort to destroy Paris's built heritage during the Occupation came through the destruction of statues. About 17,000 statues disappeared in Paris and across France during the war, as part of a Nazi/Vichy effort to ideologically purify public spaces.

That Paris was physically spared helps explain why Camus can allegorically say in *The Plague* that "It seemed as if nothing had changed in [Oran]" (220) when the plague lifts. To be sure, too many lives were lost. And those Parisians who survived were hungrier and more sickly after the war. However, unlike cities such as Warsaw, if a person left Paris in 1939 they would still very much recognise the city—at least as physically—upon returning in 1944. In this sense, Paris was very lucky.

Discuss

1. As part of *The Plague*'s allegory, Oran's Medical Board declares plague defeated on January 25th.
 - a) How is this an allegory?
 - b) What other allegorical connections can you find in Part Five Chapter 1?
2. Look more deeply into towns and cities damaged or destroyed during World War II.
 - a) How do these communities compare to Paris?
 - b) Paris came out of the war physically intact. Does this tell us much about occupation's emotional damage on the people, though?

¹ quoted in Jean Edward Smith. *The Liberation of Paris: How Eisenhower, De Gaulle, and Von Choltitz Saved the City of Lights*. Simon & Schuster, 2019, p. 147.

² quoted in Jean Edward Smith. *The Liberation of Paris: How Eisenhower, De Gaulle, and Von Choltitz Saved the City of Lights*. Simon & Schuster, 2019, p. 117.

³ Robert Gildea. *Fighters in the Shadows: A New History of The French Resistance*. Faber & Faber, 2015, p. 377.

⁴ Lauren A. Henry. "The Liberation of Paris." *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspectives*, August 2019. <https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/the-liberation-of-paris-wwii>

Part Five • Chapter 2

// the plague
was bound
to leave
traces,
anyhow, in
people's
hearts //

(227)

Cottard is disappointed that plague is leaving Oran.

1. Cottard comes to hope that the end of the plague means a fresh start. What then happens?
2. Are there people who stand to benefit from misfortune? Think of examples in real life.



Part Five • Chapter 3

// Hope had
returned,
and with it
a new zest
for life //

(229)

Despite being inoculated, Tarrou succumbs to plague.

1. Why would Rieux not send Tarrou to the isolation ward, despite the suspicion he has plague?
2. Rieux tells Tarrou “to become a saint, you need to live. So – fight away!” (231). How can Camus’ ideas about absurdism explain this statement?
3. Tarrou’s battle with plague is called “the last disastrous battle that ends a war” (233).
 - a) How is this battle an allegory for the end of the Nazi occupation of Paris?
 - b) What does Tarrou’s late infection tell us about eliminating disease, both literally and allegorically?

4. Think back to this statement attributed to Joseph Stalin, discussed in the handout **Plague and Excess Death**.

“One death is a tragedy, a million deaths a statistic.”

Why would Camus have a major character die in the book’s denouement?

5. Rieux receives word of his wife’s death at the close of the chapter. It receives much less attention than the death of Rieux’s close friend. Why would it be presented this way?



Part Five • Chapter 4

// Each was
returning
to his
personal
life,
yet the
sense of
comradeship
persisted
and they
were
exchanging
smiles and
cheerful
glances
amongst
themselves. //

(240)

When Oran's gates open up, the town enters into a time of great celebration.

1. What is the general mood as the townsfolk await the arriving train?
2. Is everyone in Oran celebrating? Why or why not?
3. Consider the closing two paragraphs of the chapter. What possibilities are presented for the purpose of life?



Historical Context

Denying Vichy and Creating the Fourth Republic

As the plague subsides in Oran, the narrator makes an observation about how people are looking back upon the disease. He says, in part, that

they denied that we had ever been that hag-ridden populace a part of which was daily fed into a furnace and went up in oily fumes, while the rest, in shackled impotence, waited their turn. (242-243)

The people of Oran have gone into a state of denial about what happened during the plague. This sense of denial can be allegorically linked to the occupation of France. As the occupation came to a close, a sense of denial set in for many French people. A belief formed that the French State—commonly called Vichy—was not actually France.



Vichy leader Marshal Pétain meeting with the United States' Ambassador to France, April 1942. Many countries—including the USA and Canada—had diplomatic relationships with Vichy until Germany's military occupied all of France in November 1942.

The End of Vichy

On the eve of D-Day, the Vichy regime still governed France. At least technically speaking. In reality, all of Metropolitan France—Zone Occupée in the north and Zone libre in the south—had been under German military control since November 1942.

With an Allied invasion imminent, de Gaulle's Free French government-in-exile, headquartered in Algiers, was making plans to govern France following the invasion. In preparation for the transition, the government-in-exile turned itself into the Provisional Government of the French Republic. This collection of Gaullists, French nationalists, socialists, communists, and anarchists hoped to take control of France as the Nazis were pushed out.

However, there was no guarantee that the provisional government would be given control. It was one of three options that were being considered by the Allies. A second option was having Allied powers negotiate a peace agreement with the Vichy regime. De Gaulle was not universally liked by Allied governments, and many American officials believed that if Vichy could be purged of its pro-German elements and renew democracy, it could be trusted to govern France. A third option was to establish a provisional military government, overseen by the Allies. This military government would control France until a new government could be established by the French.

The question of who would govern France was put to rest when de Gaulle and the Free French army marched into Paris in August 1944. The public's overwhelming support affirmed that de Gaulle's provisional government had the authority to govern France. The provisional government officially moved from Algiers to Paris on September 9th.

The provisional government set to work stabilising the country and building a social democracy, introducing all sorts of social reforms such as granting women the right to vote, nationalising key industries, and creating welfare programs.

To rid itself of Vichy, the provisional government passed an order that stated the French Third Republic never ceased to exist. All Vichy laws that were contrary to the French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity—including all laws that discriminated against Jews—were declared void *ab initio*, a legal term meaning that these laws were never valid. As well, all special courts established by Vichy to persecute political enemies were dissolved. The “Eternal France” that de Gaulle referenced in his liberation speech was going to have nothing to do with Vichy.

Goodbye, Vichy?

Establishing a provisional government, instead of the Allies negotiating peace with Vichy, meant the end of Vichy France. However, it also led to one particularly interesting effect. It allowed the French to treat Vichy as an aberration, not the real France. Recall de Gaulle's words in his liberation speech:

Paris! Paris humiliated! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But now Paris liberated! Liberated by herself, by her own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France.

By declaring the liberators the “true” and “only” France, de Gaulle's words had the effect of making Vichy not France.

If Vichy was not France, then what was it? France's post-war ruling class said that Vichy was a rogue state, established by Nazi-influenced traitors. The real France had never ceased to exist. It was pushed into exile, with its government first taking refuge in London before setting up in Algiers.

This view of Vichy as something other than the real France makes sense from de Gaulle's perspective. Recall that, as a junior minister in the Third Republic's last government, he fled for London in 1940 to set up a government-in-exile. There is a line of thought that de Gaulle's government-in-exile came to embody and thus maintain the French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

However, it cannot be forgotten that the legislatures of real France, in 1940, overwhelmingly voted the Republic out of existence. To be sure, some debate still exists over the legality of the vote. But it is generally agreed that the public supported the move. This means that Vichy, though a blight on French history, was created in France, by French legislators, with broad public support. Public opinion only began to sour on Vichy about two years into its existence, about the same time that the war began to turn in favour of the Allies and Nazi excesses became woefully apparent.

Perspectives Shift

For fifty years following the war, the official French line continued to be that France held no responsibility for the Vichy years. As late as 1994, French President François Mitterand said “I will not apologize in the name of France.... The Republic had nothing to do with this. I do not believe France is responsible.”¹ Nonetheless, there was rising pressure within France for the government to take more responsibility for mistakes of the past.

A watershed moment came in 1995. That year, the French elected a new president, Jacques Chirac. Chirac was the first of a new generation of leaders, people who had not been adults or even alive during the Vichy years. Two months into his presidency, Chirac gave a speech marking the anniversary of the Vél d'Hiv roundup. In this speech, he said:

France, land of the Enlightenment and of Human Rights, land of hospitality and asylum, France, on that day, committed an irreparable act. It failed to keep its word and delivered those under its protection to their executioners.

Chirac went on to say that “Our debt to [the victims] is inalienable.”²

The weight of Chirac's words cannot be understated. This was the first time that a French president acknowledged France's role and responsibility for Vichy crimes. It was French police, after all, who rounded up 90% of Germany's targets living in France during World War II, such as Jews, communists, Roma, and others. This includes their role in rounding up Jews for the Nazis and taking them to the Vél d'Hiv.

Two of France's three presidents since Chirac have been even more forceful in their acknowledgment that Vichy crimes were crimes of the French government. On the 70th anniversary of Vél d'Hiv, in 2012, François Hollande said that “the truth is that this crime was committed in France, by France.” Hollande added that:

The Shoah [Holocaust] was not created from a vacuum and did not emerge from nowhere. True, it was set in motion by the unprecedented and terrifying combination of single-mindedness in its racist frenzy and industrial rationality in its execution. But it was also made possible by centuries of blindness, stupidity, lies, and hatred. It was preceded by many warning signs, which failed to alert people's consciences.³

Five years later, President Emmanuel Macron also acknowledged France's role in Vichy crimes. Speaking on the 75th anniversary of Vél d'Hiv, he said that “Vichy, of course, did not represent all French people... but it was France's government and administration.” Macron went on to say that:



François Mitterand (right) with Marshal Pétain in 1942.

Like many French people, Mitterand was at one time a collaborator and later a Resister. He first worked for the Vichy regime, but then rejected it and joined the Resistance in 1943.

By acknowledging its faults, France has opened the way to repairing them. That is to its honour. That is the sign of a strong nation that can face its past. That is the courage of a people not afraid to examine its conscience and reach out to the victims and their children. Reaching out and reforming ties does not mean humiliating ourselves through some sort of repentance. It is standing tall and being strong.⁴

Macron also remarked that de Gaulle and Mitterand's denial that Vichy was France was partially due to the complexities of healing a divided and polarised post-war society. Neither of these presidents had denied that the crimes took place. In fact, Mitterand established the annual day of commemoration for the Vél d'Hiv roundup. They only denied that the French government should take responsibility for it.

Jacques Chirac's speech—and the ways in which his successors built on that speech—were key moments in French history. As legal scholar Rémi Rouquette has pointed out, Chirac's speech “acknowledged the continuity of the State, even when the most horrible government is in power”⁵. The French Republic could not absolve itself of its Vichy history.

However, for all the importance these speeches hold in history, speeches are not acts of law. It took a court case to establish the French Republic's legal responsibility. In a 2009 case, the *Conseil d'État* (Council of State)—France's highest administrative court—ruled that the Republic was responsible for Vichy arresting and deporting Jews in World War II.

The ruling satisfied many people, including Serge Klarsfeld. Klarsfeld is considered France's leading Holocaust historian. He said that “France is showing now that she is at the forefront of countries which are confronting their past, which was not the case even in the 1990s.”⁶

Changing Tides of History

In France, some controversy still remains over whether or not the French Republic is responsible for Vichy crimes. Some people still argue that Vichy was not France. Nonetheless, the words of three of its past four presidents, along with a ruling by the country's highest administrative court, say otherwise. The sense of denial about Vichy is fading away, and the willingness of the French Republic to take responsibility for its mistakes of the past is something that should be admired.

There is no doubt that the events that led up to the creation of Vichy are complicated. France's sudden defeat by the Nazis in World War II was traumatic for the nation. Nonetheless, people also are willing to understand that Vichy was not just a Nazi puppet state, created by Nazi collaborators and foisted upon France. Vichy was France's government, created by France's legislators with, at that time, broad public support.

Vichy set out on an authoritarian path, contrary to the French ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. These ideals never fully died, but it took the weight and work of many brave people—both “great” people and average people—to bring back the French Republic, where these ideals formed the backbone of the French constitution.

France's descent into Vichy should serve as a warning for all of us. In a perfect storm of circumstance, human decency—and along with it our rights and freedoms—could be swept away in a matter of days. The choices we make about our governments matter, and the support we either give or withhold from our governments matter. Liberal democracy and its embrace of free expression and minority rights should never be taken for granted.

Discuss

1. As the plague comes to an end in Oran, the sense of denial “anyhow, was what seemed evident to Rieux” (243). Think back to the handout “The Reliable Narrator and Objectivity.”
 - a) Can Rieux’s observation about the sense of denial be considered the whole truth of how people felt in Oran?
 - b) Can any one person’s perspective be considered the whole truth of a situation?
2. History does not change. But our perspectives on it do.
 - a) How do changing societal narratives change our relationship with the past?
 - b) Is it always fair to judge actions of the past with the values of today?
 - c) What uses and lessons does history have for us? How does literature help bring these lessons to life?
3. Read the speeches by Jacques Chirac, François Hollande, and Emmanuel Macron linked in the footnotes below.
 - a) What lessons from their speeches can we take as Canadians for grappling with our country’s historical treatment of Indigenous people and other minority communities?
 - b) What lessons could we offer to France as Canadians take steps to reconcile for our country’s past?

¹ quoted in Marlise Simons. “Chirac Affirms France’s Guilt In Fate of Jews.” *The New York Times*, 17 July 1995, p. A1. www.nytimes.com/1995/07/17/world/chirac-affirms-france-s-guilt-in-fate-of-jews.html

² quoted in “Speech of President Jacques Chirac, on July 16, 1995, during the commemoration of the Vél d’Hiv roundup.” www.levendel.com/En/html/chirac-s_speech.html

³ quoted in John Fanning. “Vel d’Hiv Roundup.” 21 August 2012. <https://johnfanning.me/vel-dhiv-roundup/>

⁴ quoted in President of the Republic. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/07/18/speech-by-the-president-of-the-republic-emmanuel-macron-at-the-vel-dhiv-commemoration.en>

⁵ Rémi Rouquette. “The French Administrative Court’s Rulings on Compensation Claims Brought by Jewish Survivors of World War II.” *Maryland Journal of International Law*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2010, p. 307.

⁶ quoted in Lizzy Davies. “France faces its guilt for deporting Jews in war.” *Brisbane Times*, 18 February 2009. www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/france-faces-its-guilt-for-deporting-jews-in-war-20090218-geau3g.html

Part Five • Chapter 5

// there are
more things
to admire
in men than
to despise //

(251)

Rieux reveals himself to be the narrator. Cottard seemingly goes mad, and is shot by the police.

1. Are you satisfied that Rieux “was well placed for giving a true account of all he saw and heard” (246)? Why or why not?
2. Were the police right to shoot Cottard? Was there any justification for punching and kicking him once he was in their custody? Think back to Camus’ positions on violence and the death penalty to help guide your thoughts.
3.
 - a) What is the narrator’s warning in the final two paragraphs?
 - b) How does this warning apply to diseases such as *Y. pestis*?
 - c) How does this warning apply to dangerous ideas and beliefs?





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.¹

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.²

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.³

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?

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

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

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

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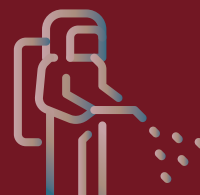
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