



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.

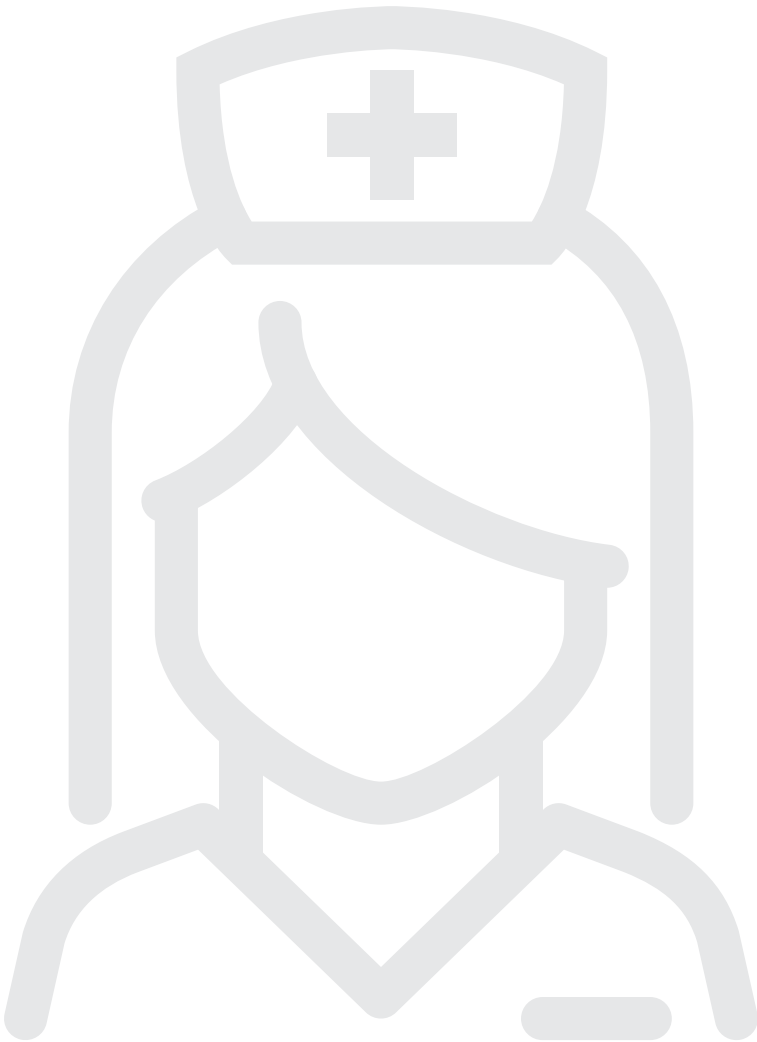
Part One • Chapter 1

// 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.

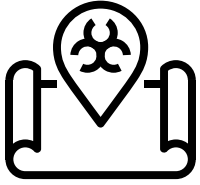
Part One • Chapter 2

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.

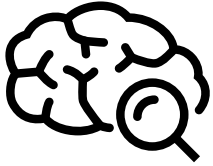
As well, Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service also has a stand-alone response program for people in mental distress.

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.



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

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)

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.’

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

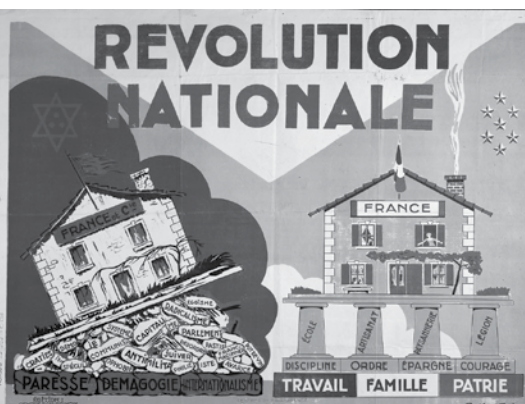
The vote that destroyed the Third Republic wasn't even close. 569 legislators voted in favour of the proposal, 80 voted against. That said, 176 were absent: some were on a boat to North Africa with hopes of setting up a government-in-exile, a few were in jail, and some were in France but never showed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

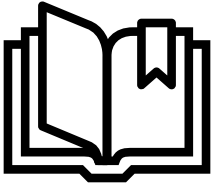
1. The Prefect believes the panic over plague is overdone. He says "Take prompt action if you like, but don't attract attention" (43).
 - a) Why would the Prefect not want to attract attention to the situation?
 - b) What are the risks of overreacting? What are the risks of under-reacting?
2. Describing 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/>

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