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In Camus' *The Plague*, for what, in your view, is the plague the most successful metaphor?

When *The Plague* was first published in 1947, it was evident to most people what Albert Camus had set out to do. For them, the novel was purely an allegory of France during the Second World War, charting the rise of Nazism, the efforts of the Resistance in the face of oppression, and the eventual decline and withdrawal of German occupying forces. In this essay, however, I will put forward the idea that although *The Plague* does closely resemble France during the occupation, the novel is in fact much more than that: not only is it an allegory of war, but also a comment on the absurdity of the world around us, religion, and, most importantly, the human condition.

In many ways, *The Plague* is a reflection of Camus' own life. Although the novel was first published in its entire form in 1947, smaller versions appeared before then, and even during the war. In his article on Camus' work, Tony Judt argues that Camus' own political and wartime experiences shape the themes of the novel. In November 1942, for example, while Camus was convalescing in the Massif Central, Allied troops landed in North Africa and the Germans responded in turn by occupying Southern France. Algeria was cut off from the mainland and Camus became an exile from his home. This separation, says Judt, from not only Camus' homeland, but also his wife and mother, is echoed strongly in the book. "Illness, separation and exile," says Judt, "were thus present in Camus's life as in his novel" (Judt, "A Hero for Our Times" in *The Guardian*, 17 Nov. 2001).

Indeed, further elements of Camus's own life can be seen in the novel – the story is not just a metaphor for totalitarianism or the rise of Nazism, but for Camus's own life and his political experiences. When Tarrou speaks to Rieux about his past, he seems to be echoing Camus's own concerns about his involvement in the Algerian Communist party in the 1930s: "I thought I was struggling against the plague. I learned that I had indirectly supported the deaths of thousands of men, that I had even caused their deaths by approving the actions and principles that inevitably led to them" (164). Tarrou, Judt argues, is "the authentic voice of Camus", when he concludes that "We are all in the plague … All I know is that one must do one's best not to be a plague victim … And this is why I have decided to reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die" (166).

Camus, it seems, is keen to reiterate the point that to give in to the plague, or even to help its spread, is the real madness, even more so than the plague itself is madness. Joining the health teams, says Rieux, our narrator, is not a significant thing to do; rather, "not doing it would have been incredible at the time" (206). Later on, Rieux says of the plague: "When you see the suffering it brings, you have to be mad, blind or a coward to resign yourself to the plague" (233).

This point, amongst others, was perhaps the most compelling for critics at the time, who, taking their cue from the novel's epigraph, a quote from Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), interpreted the text as an allegory for France during the Second World War, with the plague representing, as James Williams says in the introduction to his critique of Camus's novel, the Nazis ("la peste brune" (9)). In the quote, taken from the preface to the third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe argues that "it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not!" (qtd. in Camus

69). By this logic, it is easy to see why contemporary critiques saw Camus's work as an allegory of occupied France, and, to an extent, this is true.

There are, for example, a number of similarities between the stifling, claustrophobic world of Oran and France under Nazi occupation – similarities that make a parallel inescapable. Firstly, as both Judt and Williams argue, the historical context of the novel points strongly in favour of the war allegory. Camus published the novel in 1947, just two years after the end of the war, and, says Judt, this timing accounts for the novel's phenomenal success:

> Camus's standing guaranteed his book's success. But its timing had something to do with it too. By the time the book appeared, the French were beginning to forget the discomforts and compromises of German occupation. … Had it been delayed until the 1950s, its subject-matter would probably have been overtaken by new alignments born of the cold war.

When we look at the novel itself, parallels are easily drawn between Oran and wartime France. The dying rats at the beginning, for example, could be said to represent the rise of Nazism in Europe, and, in the same way that few took any notice of the dead rats in Oran, few worried about Hitler's *anschluß* with Austria or his occupation of the demilitarised Rhineland. Similarly, like Nazism, the plague spreads like wildfire, consuming everything in its path. In Oran, as in France, many agree with Father Paneloux's primary retort: "My brethren, you have deserved it" (197). In a desperate attempt to pre-empt the plague, Rieux pleads with the reluctant authorities

to adopt stringent measures – measures which are implemented too late. Furthermore, like France after the German invasion in 1940, Oran is quickly cut off from the outside world and divided up into various sectors.

Long periods of separation between loved ones, such as that endured by Rambert, are as common in Oran as they were in occupied France. During the war, 1½ million French soldiers spent 4½ years in German prisoner of war camps. It is no wonder that French readers in 1947 felt such an affinity with the inhabitants of Oran. Arguments that Oran is a microcosm of the war are supported by the sinister addition of vast crematoriums, fed with dead bodies transported by rail in open cattle trucks. Similarities with Jews being carted off to death camps in Eastern Europe (the crematorium is also to the east of the town) are painfully clear. As Camus writes:

> During the late summer and throughout the autumn there could daily be seen moving along the road skirting the cliffs above the sea, a strange procession of passengerless trams swaying against the skyline. The residents in the area soon learnt what was going on. And, though the cliffs were patrolled day and night, little groups of people contrived to thread their way unseen between the rocks and toss flowers into the open trailers as the trams went by. And in the warm darkness of the summer nights the cars could be heard clanking on their way, laden with flowers and corpses (110).

For Judt, Camus's account of the illegal activities that spring up in the town of Oran during the quarantine is so close to the France of World War II, that "Camus's intentions could hardly be misread." Furthermore, although the story is

told in the third person, Camus occasionally slips in "we" and "our" here and there, and, as Judt argues, "the 'we' in question – at least for Camus's primary audience – is the French in 1947."

We have seen, then, that *The Plague* fits quite neatly into an allegory for wartime France and the rise of Nazism, but can it be anything else? At the time, a number of critics questioned Camus' choice of metaphor. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, disliked the use of a natural disease as a symbol for what she took to be fascism. According to Judt, she insisted that "it relieved men of their political responsibilities…, and runs away from history and real political problems." Roland Barthes was another such critic, arguing that *The Plague* merely offers readers an "antihistorical ethic" (qtd. in Judt). But the novel goes much deeper than that. According to Judt, placing a definition on Camus's story is not quite as simple as it would first appear: "It was not 'fascism' that Camus was aiming at – an easy target, after all, especially in 1947 – but dogma, conformity, compliance and cowardice in all their intersecting public forms." He goes on to argue that while critics might say that using a natural plague seems to absolve man of his responsibilities to his fellows, what is really important is how these responsibilities are assigned: "It does not follow…that the 'plagues' that humankind brings down upon itself are 'natural' or unavoidable. But assigning responsibility for them – and thus preventing them in the future – may not be an easy matter."

Williams points instead to the irony and the absurd nature of the book in his search for its true meaning. Although *The Plague* does represent in many ways France during the war, one cannot simply argue that this is *all* the novel represents. In other respects, it is an allegory of Camus' own outlook on life, as well as a critique of religion and the stance of the Catholic Church at the beginning of the war.

As Williams has pointed out, "The world of *La Peste* is … one of perpetual doubt and ambiguity" (63). This, we can see, is a process set in motion by the novel's very title: is Camus here referring to one particular plague, or simply plague in general? If Rieux the chronicler is supposed to be both objective and report the facts to the best of his knowledge, why, then, is the date at the beginning of the story ("194-") shrouded in mystery? This ambiguity and doubt is reflected in the interpretations of the novel. Is Camus writing about the rise of Nazism, or totalitarianism in general? Is the novel set during the war, or could it be set at any time in history? Indeed, this is an interesting idea: *The Plague* is, sadly, even more relevant today in a post- September 11th world.

Williams goes on to say that the obvious discrepancies in the novel highlight a deep irony that is "a constant undercurrent in this text and may even be said to constitute its framework" (63). He goes on to give a number of brief examples of the irony Camus employs:

> Plague invades Oran just as spring is beginning to bloom…; plague produces awful figures and statistics yet must be counter-attacked precisely in those terms; Rieux ceases to live in a world of personal abstraction by throwing himself directly into the abstraction of the plague…; the commitment to group struggle coexists with a healthy pursuit of egotism…; plague brings an end to the mental plague of routine and reawakens the capacity for emotion…; the levelling process of the plague ends up creating further feelings of inequality; the news of the death of Rieux's wife from tuberculosis…arrives just as the pestilence withdraws from Oran;

> Tarrou's sudden and fatal succumbing to the disease with a double set of symptoms occurs just days before the gates reopen (63-64).

Adele King, in her book on Camus, has also noted that while the incinerators and quarantine camps call to mind German concentration camps, Rieux, "who resembles a Resistance hero, is instrumental in setting up the camps and recruiting people to staff them" (77). But the irony in these discrepancies only hints at a deeper, more fundamental contradiction. One could argue that the whole essence of the plague is exemplified in the clash of ideologies between Rieux and Paneloux, the priest. While Paneloux's "Kierkegaardian Christianity" (Williams 65) demands that the townspeople must blindly succumb to and accept their inherently absurd human condition, Rieux consistently rejects Christianity because, in his view, the existence of evils like the plague comes into direct conflict with the idea of a kind and caring God. However, as Williams points out, Rieux's philosophy is "highly paradoxical since he essentially blames God for not existing" (65). Perhaps Rieux *does* believe in Paneloux's God, and yet does not want to admit it, because to admit that would be to succumb and give in to the plague: an "incredible" act. The essential difference, perhaps, between these two men then is that while Paneloux is happy to accept God's judgement on the townspeople of Oran, Rieux rejects it. For Rieux, God is unfair and unjust: for Paneloux, God is not to be questioned. In the end, Panelou x dies, appropriately enough, from the very punishment of which he so approved.

In his appraisal of *The Plague*, Williams refers to a notable critic, Colin Davis, who has convincingly argued that the shift from "dogmatism to doubt" (66) in Paneloux's two sermons highlights the fact that it is virtually impossible to give *The Plague* a definitive meaning or interpretation. Furthermore, he points out, the

narrator's inherent obscurity illustrates the uncertainty of the novel itself. Formulas such as "…this is at least the conviction of the narrator…" have the potential to undermine the narrator's credibility and authority, as well as raising the question of whether the text supports the narrator's views. According to Davis, the author's "compulsive" (66) use of qualifying phrases ("perhaps", "in some ways" etc.) cast doubts on Rieux's interpretative licence. Furthermore, the narrator is forced to acknowledge the elasticity of the term "we": Cottard's success in the black market and the periodic interruption of gunfire while Rieux is talking to Tarrou one evening show that not all the town's inhabitants are humble heroes. Davis argues that with these discrepancies in the narrative, Camus was exploring the darker side of humanity, and especially enclosed communities. Says Williams: "Camus may gesture towards an ethics of generosity based on the identity of subjects in a unified community, but communities operate as much by exclusion as by inclusion, and the other face of generosity towards one's own kind is hostility towards the outsider" (66-67). In *The Plague*, the outsider is the reader who, argues Davis, is effectively "'murdered' by the text's strategies of domination and bafflement" (67).

Philip Thody, in his book on Camus, further explores the idea of an 'absurd' world – the world of *The Plague* in which an illness is seemingly visited on a population for no apparent reason. Unlike illnesses such as AIDS, syphilis, heart disease or lung cancer, which are all diseases created or aided by the immoral or unwise conduct of man, argues Thody, plague is essentially random. Although it can be prevented by improved sanitation and it spreads more easily in crowded urban areas, it is not, unless we subscribe to Paneloux's philosophy, man's 'fault'. As Thody says, "It can be explained, if at all, only by saying that the universe makes no sense whatsoever if you look at it in terms of human ideas of right and wrong" (47).

This brings us back to the arguments of Simone de Beauvoir and Roland Barthes, that the use of a biological epidemic as a metaphor is unsound, and sidesteps major historical issues. As Thody and Williams have explained, however, this is not necessarily the case. Barthes, though, went further. In early 1955 he wrote an article on *The Plague* in which he questioned whether an ethic of solidarity, which Camus perpetrates in his novel, is really enough to combat the evils of this world in their many forms. According to Barthes, at no time is the friendship between Rieux and the other characters of the book really a "general and well-defined solidarity" (qtd. in Williams 69). Because these characters, according to Camus and his ideas of moral choice, are neither executioners nor victims, Barthes argues, they are condemned to individual solitude. Camus reacted strongly and quickly to Barthes' critique in an open letter in which he argued decisively that *The Plague*, "which I wanted to be read on a number of levels, nevertheless has as its obvious content the struggle of the European resistance movements against Nazism" (Thody 1967, 253). Camus went on to say that the proof for this lies in the fact that "although this enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized him" (253). Moreover, argues Camus, extracts from *The Plague* appeared during France's Occupation in a collection of resistance texts, and, in answer to Barthes' questions about solidarity, *The Plague* "does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *L'Étranger* to *La Peste*, it is towards solidarity and participation" (253).

It is difficult, however, to swallow Camus's assertion that his text is an allegory of wartime France so easily. As Williams points out, these declarations paper over the narrator's apparent indecision and numerous precautions in such a way as to

throw into question Camus's whole argument in this respect. The reason for this, explains Williams, is that Camus's letter reflects his growing anxiety, by 1955, about the growth of Communism and the threat it provided. For Camus, world Communism was as big a threat as Nazism – according to Williams, "later, in 1959, he even referred to certain forms of socialism as being inspired by the devil" (69). In this light, Camus's claims seem doubtful. So, while his text functions on a variety of levels, Williams proves that Camus' work is not simply about the war alone.

The Plague is a novel bound in contradictions, and this is what makes attributing a meaning to the book so difficult. Perhaps, one could argue, it would be wrong to give the story any one meaning, since the epidemic can represent so many things. Although the world of Oran can be translated neatly to the world of France under the German occupation, as Camus so adamantly stated in 1955, it also represents Camus' own philosophy about the absurd nature of our world, in which we are condemned to live, where everything, including war and religion, are ultimately futile. At the same time, however, the novel offers a compelling examination of the dangers of totalitarianism in its many forms, be it Hitler's Nazi empire or Stalin's Communist one, and this, I feel, is the most comprehensive and successful metaphor. Sadly, it is a metaphor that is thrown into stark context today in a world in which totalitarianism has been by no means abolished. Just as *The Plague* manages to translate its message into another language (studied, as it was, in translation), it's message too, translates across the years. *The Plague*'s message is as effective and poignant today as it has always been.

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