The Plague

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALBERT CAMUS

Camus was born to a French family in Algeria, which was then a colony of France. He was raised in poverty, and suffered from tuberculosis while at the University of Algiers. He joined the Communist Party for several years, then wrote for an anti-colonialist Algerian newspaper, joined an anarchist group, and then wrote and fought for the French Resistance against the Nazi occupiers in WWII. He was married to Simone Hié and later Francine Faure, and had two children. Camus is often associated with his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, and is best known for his novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, and his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He consistently held leftist political views, supported human rights, and vigorously opposed war and capital punishment. He was killed in a car accident at the age of 46.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Plague was heavily influenced by the Nazi occupation of France during WWII, during which Camus joined the French Resistance and wrote for an underground newspaper. The plague is often considered an allegory for war and military occupation, and Camus drew from his own experience to describe the isolation and struggle of the novel. The plague itself is based on several cholera and plague epidemics that swept through Oran during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The absurdist and existentialist philosophies present in the book began with Søren Kierkegaard in the mid-1800s, and were clarified by Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus himself.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Søren Kierkegaard is considered the first existentialist philosopher, and his books *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling* first confronted the Absurd, from which Camus would take his philosophy. Franz Kafka was another important influence on Camus, especially his novel *The Trial*. Camus' most famous contemporary was Jean-Paul Sartre, a French existentialist philosopher and author of *Nausea* and *No Exit*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Plague (La Peste)*
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1947
- **Literary Period:** 20th century philosophy, Absurdism and Existentialism
- **Genre:** Philosophical novel, Absurdist fiction
- **Setting:** Oran, Algeria
- **Climax:** Tarrou struggles against the plague and dies
- **Antagonist:** The plague
- **Point of View:** First person limited, from an unknown narrator who is revealed to be Dr. Rieux in the last chapter

EXTRA CREDIT

Nobel. Camus received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. He was the second-youngest recipient of the award, and the first winner to have been born in Africa.

Soccer. Camus was a great lover of soccer, and played as a goalkeeper for several years. He was once asked if he preferred literature or football (soccer), and he replied "Football, without hesitation."

PLOT SUMMARY

The Plague concerns an outbreak of bubonic plague in the French-Algerian port city of Oran, sometime in the 1940s. The first-person narrator is unnamed but mostly follows Dr. Bernard Rieux. Rieux notices the sudden appearance of dying **rats** around town, and soon thousands of rats are coming out into the open to die. The public grows panicked, and the government finally arranges a daily cremation of rat bodies. Soon after the rat epidemic disappears, M. Michel, the concierge for Dr. Rieux's office building, comes down with a strange fever and dies. More cases appear, and Dr. Rieux and his colleague Dr. Castel believe the disease is bubonic plague. They urge the government to take action, but the authorities drag their feet until the death toll rises so high that the plague is impossible to deny. Finally they close the gates and quarantine Oran.

The townspeople react to their sudden isolation with feelings of exile and longing for absent loved ones, with each individual assuming that their suffering is unique. Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest, delivers a sermon declaring that the plague is a divine punishment for Oran's sins. Raymond Rambert, a foreign journalist, tries to escape Oran and rejoin his wife in Paris, but he is held up by the bureaucracy and the unreliability of the criminal underground. He is aided in his attempts by Cottard, a man who committed an unknown crime in the past and has since then lived in constant paranoia. Cottard is the only citizen to welcome the plague, as it reduces the rest of the public to his level of fear and loneliness, and he builds up a small fortune smuggling. Meanwhile Rieux struggles ceaselessly against the

plague and is joined by Jean Tarrou, another visitor to Oran, and Joseph Grand, an older municipal clerk who longs for his ex-wife and struggles daily over the first sentence of a book he is trying to write.

Tarrou organizes an anti-plague sanitation league, and many volunteers join to help. Rambert finalizes his escape plan, but when he learns that Dr. Rieux is also separated from his wife (who is ill in a sanatorium) he decides to stay and fight the plague. After several months the public loses the selfishness in their suffering and recognizes the plague as a collective disaster. Everyone grows weary and depressed, and the death toll is so high that the authorities have to cremate the bodies. The young son of M. Othon, the strict local magistrate, comes down with the plague and Rieux and his companions – among them Father Paneloux – watch him suffer and die. Paneloux is shaken by the child's death and he delivers a second sermon, this time declaring that the horrors of plague leave only the choice to believe everything (about Christianity) or deny everything. Paneloux falls ill and dies soon afterwards, though he does not have the symptoms of the plague.

Tarrou explains to Rieux how he has spent his life opposing the death penalty and "fighting the plague" in its many forms. The two men take a brief break to go swimming and then they go back to work. Grand falls ill with the plague, but then he makes a miraculous recovery. Other patients recover as well, and soon the epidemic is on the retreat, but then Tarrou falls ill. After a long struggle against the disease he dies. The townspeople slowly regain their hope and begin to celebrate. Only Cottard is upset by the end of the plague, and on the day the town's gates reopen, he goes mad and starts randomly firing a gun into the street until he is arrested. Grand writes a letter to his ex-wife and resumes work on his book. Rambert's wife joins him in Oran, but Dr. Rieux learns that his wife has died at the sanatorium. The townspeople quickly return to their normal lives, trying to pretend nothing has changed. Dr. Rieux reveals himself as the narrator of the chronicle, which he wrote as a testament to the victims of the plague and the struggles of the workers. He knows the victory over the plague is only temporary, as the bacillus microbe can lie dormant for years.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dr. Bernard Rieux – The narrator and main character of the novel, a doctor who is the first to notify the authorities of the plague and urge them to take action. Dr. Rieux is an atheist and a humanist, but he focuses on working as a healer more than finding philosophical or religious answers. Rieux struggles ceaselessly against the plague despite his great fatigue and the signs that his efforts are having little effect. Rieux is separated from his wife at the beginning of the novel, but he does not allow his personal suffering – or even individual pity for the plague victims – to distract him from his battle against the plague itself.

Jean Tarrou – A man visiting Oran when the plague strikes, who takes detailed notes about the city and therefore has a very good record of the early days of the plague. Eventually Rieux and Tarrou become close friends. Tarrou has a similar belief in social responsibility as Rieux does, but Tarrou is more philosophical than the doctor, often musing about sainthood, the death penalty, and the absurdity of life. Tarrou forms the volunteer anti-plague effort and works just as hard as Dr. Rieux in battling the epidemic. He contracts the plague himself, and his failed struggle to survive it is the novel's climax.

Joseph Grand – An elderly municipal clerk of Oran who has never been promoted from his low-ranking job. His marriage to Jeanne also fell into loveless routine, and Jeanne left him. Grand struggles constantly with trying to express himself, and suffers over trying to find the right words. Because of this inability to communicate he could never protest his lack of work promotion or justify himself to Jeanne. Grand is also trying to write a novel, but he cannot get past the first sentence, as he wants every word to be perfect. Grand joins the anti-plague effort, and gets the disease but recovers.

Raymond Rambert – A journalist from Paris who is trapped in Oran by the quarantine. Rambert desperately tries to escape the city and rejoin his wife in Paris, using both official and illegal means. He suffers many delays, and by the time he succeeds in securing an escape plan he decides to stay and help with the anti-plague effort.

Cottard – A man who committed an unknown crime in the past and so lives in a constant state of paranoia and fear of arrest, though he also craves human contact. Dr. Rieux meets him when Cottard tries to kill himself, fearing external punishment. Cottard is the only citizen of Oran who welcomes the plague, as it reduces the rest of the population to his natural state of fear and loneliness, and distracts the authorities from potentially arresting him. Cottard also runs a profitable smuggling business during the epidemic. When the plague retreats he goes mad and is arrested for firing a gun at passersby in the street.

Father Paneloux – A Jesuit priest and scholar of St. Augustine. When the plague arrives Paneloux preaches a sermon about how it is a punishment sent by God. After watching the death of an innocent child, Paneloux's faith is shaken, and he delivers a second, more desperate sermon and then succumbs to an unknown illness.

Dr. Richard – Another colleague of Dr. Rieux's, the head of the medical association in Oran. When confronted with the potential outbreak of plague, Richard prefers to take a "wait and see" approach rather than alarm the public. He falls to the disease just before he is about to make an optimistic statement

about the decreasing death toll.

MINOR CHARACTERS

M. Othon – A police magistrate of Oran who is strict and severe with everyone, including his children. After the death of his son, some gentleness appears in Othon's character, but he dies of plague soon afterward.

Mme. Rieux – Dr. Rieux's mother who comes to stay with him while his wife is away. A figure of quiet stability, peace, and kindness.

Jacques Othon – M. Othon's young son, who gets the plague and suffers horribly before dying.

Dr. Castel – An elderly colleague of Dr. Rieux's, the first person to say the word "plague" in describing the strange illness that appears in Oran. Castel battles the plague alongside Rieux, though he mostly focuses on developing an anti-plague serum.

The asthma patient – An old Spanish man whom Dr. Rieux treats for asthma. He stays in bed all day transferring dried peas from one bucket to another, and gleefully expounds theories about the plague and the townspeople of Oran.

The man who spits on cats – An old man Tarrou observes in the building across from his hotel. The man comes out onto his balcony every afternoon, lures stray cats to approach, and spits on them. He serves as a symbol of the absurdity of life.

M. Michel – The concierge for the building where Dr. Rieux works. M. Michel is greatly distressed by the appearance of the dead **rats**, and is the first victim of the plague.

The Prefect – The Prefect of Oran, who generally drags his feet instead of taking action, preferring not to alarm the townspeople.

Mercier – The man in charge of pest control for the city, whom Rieux calls about the **rat** situation.

Jeanne – Grand's ex-wife who left him because of the wearying monotony of their lives.

Dr. Rieux's wife – She is ill and leaves for a sanatorium just before the plague strikes.

Gonzales – One of Cottard's friends in the criminal underground, who befriends Rambert over their mutual love of football.

Marcel and Louis – Two young sentries at the gates of Oran who offer to smuggle Rambert out for a fee.

Garcia – A man whom Cottard knows in the criminal underground. He connects Rieux with others who might be able to help him escape from the town.

Raoul – Another person in the criminal underground who helps to arrange the possibility of Rieux's escape from the town.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

ABSURDISM

The Plague is essentially a philosophical novel, meaning that it forwards a particular worldview through its plot and characterization. Camus is often considered an existentialist, but the philosophy he most identified with and developed was called absurdism. At its most basic, this philosophy holds that the universe is absurd and meaningless – there is no God or cosmic order – and that humans are doomed to suffer and die. Because of this situation, humans have three options in life: to commit suicide, to make a "leap of faith" and choose to believe in a divine entity or order, or to accept the Absurd and create one's own meaning in life. Camus advocated this third choice, as the first option is a kind of cowardice and the second is a psychological lie that Camus even compared to suicide.

In *The Plague*, the besieged town becomes a microcosm of the universe, and the different characters illustrate different ways humans deal with the Absurd – that is, the plague. Cottard first tries to commit suicide (because of his guilt, another kind of plague) and then works *with* the epidemic, profiting off of others' suffering. Father Paneloux tries to assign order to the plague (as a punishment from God), but when he is faced with the true nature of the Absurd through watching a child die, Paneloux loses his faith and succumbs to disease himself. The protagonists of the novel, Rieux, Rambert, and Tarrou, live and struggle in the way that Camus advocates. They recognize the Absurd (the power of the plague and their own inevitable doom) but still work ceaselessly against it, finding meaning in healing others.

SUFFERING AND DEATH

The rest of the themes generally follow as corollaries to Camus' philosophy. In the novel the bubonic plague is a symbol of many things – the harsh, meaningless universe, the human condition, or war – but all of them mean suffering and death. The people of Oran deal with this meaningless suffering in various ways. At first they try to ignore or downplay it, and then they see it as a personal antagonist separating them from their loved ones. Some see it as divine punishment or a means to profit, and others eventually give up hope and succumb to what seems inevitable. Jacques, the young son of M. Othon, is the most poignant example of suffering and death in the novel. His torturous

death is described in detail, and it ultimately leads Father Paneloux to doubt his faith in God. The novel is bleak and often crushing, as suffering and death loom constantly overhead, but it is through this that Camus reminds us of the potential horror of the human condition, and the need to confront it directly.

HEROISM AND DEFIANCE

Despite the enormity of suffering and death in the world and the seeming omnipotence of the plague, there are instances of heroism and altruistic struggle as well. Camus immediately undercuts the "heroic" efforts of the volunteer groups by declaring that to the fight the plague is the only decent, truly human thing to do, but this is because he believes that humans are generally good. These "heroes" fit into his idea of Absurdism, as in the face of a harsh, uncaring universe, one must struggle to help others and "fight the plague," even if defeat is inevitable. This kind of struggle in the face of certain death *is* a possible definition of heroism, however, so Camus is proposing a kind of heroism in everyday life – to embrace the Absurd, but at the same time to struggle hopelessly against it.

The anti-plague sanitation squad is the most concrete example of this kind of defiance, and the most sympathetic characters of the novel try hard to be "healers" rather than merely "pestilences" or "victims," as Tarrou says. Rieux, the central protagonist, does not have a concrete philosophical or religious reason for struggling against the plague, but he knows that he *must* struggle, and Camus implies that this is the most important thing. Grand is the only character that Camus explicitly calls heroic. This might be because Grand is a sort of mediocre everyman, but he also joins the anti-plague effort and inspires others to defiance.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

While *The Plague* is a tale of absurdist philosophy, it is also a novel with living characters and a deeply human story, and Camus' writing is potent in its imagery of suffering, despair, and courage. The chronicle's unknown narrator eventually reveals himself as Dr. Rieux, who has been trying to take a more detached view of the plague. This is a reflection of Camus himself, who describes the calamity of Oran objectively, without romanticizing the suffering or heroism or preaching any moral lessons, except that humans must always do battle with plague.

Within the narrative, other characters also struggle with language and communication just as they struggle with disease. Grand, the most important example, is constantly trying to write a book but is never satisfied with even the first sentence, and he is incapable of justifying himself to his ex-wife because he can't find the right words for a letter. Grand's efforts often act as comedic relief, but they also serve as a kind of artistic struggle against the Absurd in communication. There is no hope of ever truly knowing or communicating with another soul, but Grand still defiantly keeps seeking that perfect sentence. The dialogue between other characters is also sparse and implies a struggle to communicate, as Rieux and his mother can never speak of their mutual affection, and Rieux and Tarrou must awkwardly confirm their friendship. Camus seems to say that the world of language is just as vast and unknowable as the universe, but we must still try to make connections between people.

EXILE AND IMPRISONMENT

The plague simultaneously exiles and imprisons the town of Oran, and its closed gates leave many citizens separated from their loved ones. Rambert and Rieux are both separated by the quarantine from the women they love, and Rambert, a foreigner, is exiled from his own home as well. Camus also describes the townspeople's feelings of exile as the plague progresses: first everyone wants to speed up time and end the plague, or they work ceaselessly (like Rambert) to escape and rejoin their lost loved one, while later many citizens give up hope or live in fantasies of regret and longing. For others like Tarrou, their exile is a separation from an idea, a sense of happiness, or a peace that Tarrou only finds in his last struggle against death.

The closed gates of Oran also lead to a sense of imprisonment within the town itself. Many critics have compared the plague to war, and the quarantine of Oran to the German occupation of France in WWII. There are many examples of this in the novel, such as the martial law imposed on the town, the mass graves, and Camus' own experiences working for the French Resistance against the Nazis. Like an occupied town, the plague makes Oran a microcosm of Camus' absurd universe. The townspeople all suffer the same epidemic and experience similar kinds of exile and imprisonment, but they still distrust each other and feel alone in their suffering. Only those who accept the plague's power and their own state of exile, but still struggle against it – like Rambert, who finally refuses to escape to his wife if he must escape as a coward – are able to find a personal sense of freedom.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RATS

Rats appear as the first omen of the plague, and they symbolize both the plague itself and the people of Oran. As symbols of the plague, rats represent the kind of darkness in the world that people try to ignore or

rationalize, as humans generally try to ignore rats until the rats are literally dying in front of them. This is similar to how Father Paneloux tries to rationalize the plague as a judgment from God until he is faced with the personal suffering and death of a child, and then his faith is shaken. As symbols of the people of Oran, the rats are the first creatures to die from the plague, struck down ominously and at random just as the people will be later. The rats then begin to return to the city at the end of the novel, as a sign that the plague has retreated and the people of Oran will recover.

THE MAN WHO SPITS ON CATS

Tarrou describes his neighbor, a "dapper little old man" who goes out onto his balcony every day and drops torn paper into the street to lure stray cats. Whenever a cat approaches the old man spits at it, and when he hits one he looks supremely satisfied. When the dogs and cats are killed during the plague (as carriers of plague-bearing fleas), the old man seems heartbroken, and he never appears on his balcony again after that. This man and his strange habit symbolizes the absurdist universe that Camus proposes in his novel. There is no inherent meaning in the man's actions, but he creates his own meaning from them, which gives him happiness. The extreme absurdity of spitting on cats only emphasizes how absurd all human action is in the face of a vast and uncaring universe. We are all doomed to suffer and die, so anything we might do in the face of that is just as silly as spitting on cats – yet we must keep doing it, as it is only through creating our own meaning that we can give our lives value.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Plague* published in 1991.

Part 1 Quotes

Michel's death marked, one might say, the end of the first period, that of bewildering portents, and the beginning of another, relatively more trying, in which the perplexity of the early days gave place to panic… Our townsfolk realized that they had never dreamed it possible that our little town should be chosen out for such grotesque happenings as the wholesale death of rats in broad daylight or the decease of concierges through exotic maladies… Still, if things had gone thus far and no farther, force of habit would doubtless have gained the day, as usual.

Related Characters: M. Michel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, the plague comes to the seaside town of Oran. At first, the people of the community are in denial of the plague's very existence. A hotel concierge, M. Michel, is the first to die of the plague--and at that point, the people can no longer deny that they have a problem.

What's interesting about the community's response to the plague, we should keep in mind, is that they don't get wind of the problem sooner. Only when they have no other choice but to recognize the danger do the people change their behavior. Furthermore, we're told that the people would have returned to their ordinary lives had only M. Michel (and all the city's rats) died--their desire for normality is so great that they only change their routine in a moment of utter crisis. The passage is representative, then, of the force of "momentum" in human civilization. Humans refuse to accept the fundamental absurdity and danger of the universe--they cling to their habits and routines to distract themselves from what, deep down, they know to be true.

Every day… a dapper little old man stepped out on the balcony on the other side of the street… Leaning over the balcony he would call: "Pussy! Pussy!" in a voice at once haughty and endearing… He then proceeded to tear some paper into scraps and let them fall into the street; interested by the fluttering shower of white butterflies, the cats came forward, lifting tentative paws toward the last scraps of paper. Then, taking careful aim, the old man would spit vigorously at the cats and, whenever a liquid missile hit the quarry, would beam with delight.

Related Characters: Jean Tarrou (speaker), The man who spits on cats

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25-26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to one of the most loaded symbols in the novel--the man who spits at cats. This old man, very well-dressed, goes outside every morning and tries to lure stray cats to within "spitting distance." When the cats have congregated, the old man spits at them again and again, taking great pleasure in hitting them.

What, if anything, does the scene symbolize? Camus seems to intend his scene as a symbol for the absurdity of the universe. Humans are ill-equipped to recognize the truth: the universe is a crazy, meaningless place. As such, they often choose to to invent their own meanings for life: they give themselves routines to distract themselves from the absurdity. The irony, of course, is that the routines and hobbies that humans adopt for themselves are every bit as absurd as the universe itself (and, Camus argues, no less absurd than this man's bizarre ritual). The old man seems to hate the cats (he enjoys spitting at them) and yet he clearly *needs* cats--they seem to give his life meaning, and when the plague kills them, he disappears into his apartment and presumably despairs. Humans are all alone in the universe--even our enemies serve a useful purpose in giving us someone to connect with. In all, the episode of the cats suggests the absurd measures we take to entertain ourselves and build communities for ourselves in the face of the crushing meaningless of existence.

❝ The word “plague” had just been uttered for the first time. At this stage of the narrative, with Dr. Bernard Rieux standing at his window, the narrator may, perhaps, be allowed to justify the doctor’s uncertainty and surprise – since, with very slight differences, his reaction was the same as that of the majority of the townsfolk. 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.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

For the first time in the novel, a character uses the world "plague." It's as if the full measure of the danger to the town of Oran didn't *exist* until people gave it a name. The doctor, Bernard Rieux (who, we later learn, is the true narrator of the novel), is baffled, along with everybody else, by the arrival of the plague. It's worth understanding why.

History is full of plagues--and yet each new plague surprises humanity. Humans are so desperate for order and unity that they can't accept the basic truth: their lives are always in some kind of danger. As soon as a danger like a plague passes, humans forget all about it, deluding themselves into believing that their civilization will last forever. In short, the plague brings out the deep truths that most people, Bernard included, would prefer not to accept. By the end of the novel, Bernard seems to have reached his own peace with the plague; he realizes that humans have to face directly the chaos and looming death in their lives.

❝ And this difficulty in finding his words had come to be the bane of his life. “Oh, Doctor,” he would exclaim, “how I’d like to learn to express myself!” He brought the subject up each time he met Rieux.
That evening, as he watched Grand’s receding form… He realized how absurd it was, but he simply couldn’t believe that a pestilence on the great scale could befall a town where people like Grand were to be found, obscure functionaries cultivating harmless eccentricities.

Related Characters: Joseph Grand (speaker), Dr. Bernard Rieux

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46-47

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to Joseph Grand, a lowly clerk whose life is perhaps the most absurd of anyone in the town of Oran (except for the man who spits on cats). Physically, Grand is a comical figure--he wears clothing that's a little too big for his body. Furthermore, Grand finds it very difficult to express himself--he spends his life trying to write a book, but only ever revises the first sentence constantly. He also wants to justify himself to his ex-wife, who left him, but doesn't because he feels he can never find the right words.

Although it's easy to laugh at Grand, Camus is sympathetic to him, and sees in Grand the strengths and weaknesses of the human race. Humans simply lack the capacity to explain their feelings to other people. Language is our only weapon against chaos--and yet, when we need it most (i.e., when a

plague hits), language fails us. But it's crucial that--like Camus, and the farcical Grand--we keep *trying* to explain the chaos of the universe with language.

On another level, Rieux's thoughts on Grand further show how our human sense of order and civilization serves to distract us from the absurd reality of the universe. Grand is a farcical figure, but also familiar and somehow comforting--his existence is a sign that Oran is the kind of place where such "obscure" and "harmless" men can live out their lives in peace. This small vision of life is then contrasted with the massive, uncaring plague--something that seems to exist in an altogether different universe from Grand and his futile search for the right words. Yet both Grand and the plague exist in the same world--and it's this fact, Camus argues, this clash between the absurd and the human will, that we must constantly be confronting.

❝ Moreover, the epidemic seemed to be on the wane; on some days only ten or so deaths were notified. Then, all of a sudden, the figure shot up again, vertically. On the day when the death-roll touched thirty, Dr. Rieux read an official telegram that the Prefect had just handed him, remarking: "So they've got alarmed at last." The telegram ran: *Proclaim a state of plague stop close the town.*

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker), The Prefect

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Even after the plague has arrived in Oran, the people try to deny its existence for as long as possible. People are dying all around them--and yet nobody seems particularly concerned, unless someone they *know* is dead. It's only at the very last moment, when the death roll shoots up enormously, that the town gets its act together. The political leadership (represented by the Prefect of the town) makes the decision to close off the town, and by the same token, the people seem to be taking the plague more seriously, too.

The passage is a good example of how law and order function in civilization. The main business of law and order, we could conclude from the passage, is to distract people from the chaos of the world, and to ignore chaos for as long as possible. The Prefect, quite aside from attending to his people's needs (as a good Prefect should, you'd think), drags his feet for as long as humanly possible before doing anything about his community's problems. Society's highest priority, we can see, isn't safety at all--it's order.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the situation in Oran has gotten more serious. The plague has killed many of the town's citizens, and the town's gates have been shut to the outside world. We're told that the true result of the plague, at least at first, is exile. What does Camus mean by "exile?"

Literally, of course, the plague exiles the town from the rest of the world, and vice versa. People in Oran can't leave their community, for fear that they'd spread the plague to the rest of human society. Such a plot device allows Oran to stand in for all of civilization--the town is a microcosm for the world itself. Furthermore, Camus may mean "exile" in the sense of alienation. The people are isolated from each other, since they're often forced to stay in their homes, and fear that their neighbors may infect them with the plague. But they're also alienated from themselves--deprived of communities, they're forced to recognize the void inside each one of them.

❝ Grand, too, had suffered. And he, too, might – as Rieux pointed out – have made a fresh start. But no, he had lost faith. Only, he couldn't stop thinking about her. What he'd have liked to do was to write her a letter justifying himself.
"But it's not easy," he told Rieux. "I've been thinking it over for years. While we loved each other we didn't need words to make ourselves understood. But people don't love forever. A time came when I should have found the words to keep her with me – only I couldn't."

Related Characters: Joseph Grand, Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82-83

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn a little about Grand's past. As a younger man, Grand fell in love with and married a woman named Jeanne. Eventually, though, their love fell apart, and Jeanne abandoned Grand. Grand continues to look back on his time with Jeanne fondly--furthermore, he seems to recognize the role of language in the deterioration of their marriage.

Nietzsche said, "That for which we have words is already dead in our hearts." Camus seems to agree: the things that we have the power to talk about are somehow lifeless and meaningless. Language is supposed to be a tool for expressing our inner feelings, yet here Grand suggests that his and Jeanne's inner feelings can never be put into words. Thus Grand's farcical attempt to always "finds the right words" is actually heroic and very human.

> One grows out of pity when it's useless. And in this feeling that his heart had slowly closed in on itself, the doctor found a solace, his only solace, for the almost unendurable burden of his days... To fight abstraction you must have something of it in your own make-up.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Dr. Rieux has begun treating the plague, only to realize that there's really nothing he can do to fight it--all his medicine and education is powerless to defeat the sheer destructive force of the disease. And yet the doctor doesn't give up. He devotes all his time to fighting the plague. He's so intent on defeating the plague that it occupies his entire consciousness, to the point where he doesn't even show pity or compassion for his patients.

The simple reason why the doctor doesn't pity his victims is that pity is useless in such a situation--it's a mere distraction from medicine. Rieux's explanation might seem pretty callous and even cruel (surely his patients would benefit from getting a little comfort or kindness from their doctor, if only to ease their final moments of life). But perhaps Rieux sees something disingenuous about pity itself. By showing pity for his victims, he would be accepting defeat--thus, it's because he continues to fight the plague that he doesn't show emotions of any kind. Furthermore, we're told that Rieux behaves abstractly--that is, he treats the plague as an entity itself, something that he is battling on an ideological as well as physical level. Rieux's idea is somewhat like that of a vaccination: in order to fight the enormous, indifferent forces of destruction, he has to become a little indifferent himself.

> "If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff."

Related Characters: Father Paneloux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, an authority figure, a priest named Father Paneloux, tries to offer the people of Oran comfort and reassurance in the face of the plague. Paneloux offers a rather frustrating "explanation" for the plague: it's a punishment from God. Those who are good and moral have nothing to fear from the disease (or from dying from it, as they will be rewarded with Heaven); those who are wicked, however, are either dead and in Hell already, or will soon be.

Paneloux's sermon is indicative of the kind of reasoning that many religions use to offer comfort to their followers. Life is full of pain and chaos, we know--religion tells us that we can overcome chaos by being righteous, pious people, or by following a set of rules or beliefs. Paneloux's speech doesn't offer any concrete reassurances or comforts: instead, he offers the "comfort" of meaning. The simple fact is that the plague has no meaning--and that is its true horror. Paneloux tries to swap morality for meaninglessness--a futile but perhaps heroic struggle. In the face of an indifferent, destructive world, humans try to tell stories to make themselves feel better--religion may be the best story of all.

> At first the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But, now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the fires of summer...

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're told how the people of the community respond to their forced exile. The people of Oran are unable to leave their community for any reason--yet it's not until Father Paneloux's sermon that they realize how trapped they really are.

The passage could be considered a critique of religion, as articulated in Father Paneloux's sermon (see quote above). Paneloux has told his followers that they're been imprisoned by God himself as a kind of ambiguous punishment. The knowledge that there's some logic to the plague--God is using disease to make his children into better people--is comforting in a narrow, limited sense. But it's also horrifying: the people have been told that they're being punished, but nobody knows what, exactly, the punishment is for. (As Camus later says, in being treated like criminals, they start to act like criminals.) In other words, religion does some good by providing a sense of order and meaning to the universe; and yet it also causes problems by filling people with an irrational sense of guilt and culpability.

Notice also that the passage mentions the "blue dome of the sky," as if life itself is just a big prison. In such a way, Camus emphasizes the microcosmic nature of the town of Oran--like it or not, we're all just trapped in our own mortality, at once totally free and totally imprisoned.

> Grand went on talking, but Rieux failed to follow all the worthy man was saying. All he gathered was that the work he was engaged on ran to a great many pages, and he was at almost excruciating pains to bring it to perfection. “Evenings, whole weeks, spent on one word, just think! Sometimes on a mere conjunction!”

Related Characters: Joseph Grand (speaker), Dr. Bernard Rieux

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Joseph's Grand's quixotic project: a book that expresses itself perfectly, in which every word is ideal. Grand puts so much time into his book that, so far, he's only on the first sentence. He struggles with his book all the time, often spending hours on a single word--which he often crosses out in the end. Grand's struggle for literary immortality is slow, and also comically futile. (And the sentence itself isn't even very good.) And yet he keeps writing.

Camus seems to see something both heroic and absurd in Grand's actions. Much as the other characters embark on folly-filled projects of their own (like Dr. Rieux's practically-useless attempts to cure the plague), Grand has the courage to aim for something impossible, and never give up. (The fact that Camus himself is a writer, and often spent long amounts of time on a few sentences, is another sign that he admires Grand's fortitude, and even sees something of himself in Grand.)

> A system of patrols was instituted and often in the empty, sweltering streets, heralded by a clatter of horse hoofs on the cobbles, a detachment of mounted police would make its way between the parallel lines of close-shut windows. Now and again a gunshot was heard; the special brigade recently detailed to destroy cats and dogs, as possible carriers of infection, was at work. And these whipcrack sounds startling the silence increased the nervous tension already existing in the town.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camus's novel is at its most political. As the plague gets worse, the leaders of the community form patrol groups, whose duty is to round up the cats and dogs in the town and kill them. It's believed that cats and dogs spread the plague (through their fleas)--therefore, the patrol sees itself as saving the town by murdering the animals.

Camus gives no indication that the patrol groups' actions prevent or slow the spread of the plague in any way. And yet the patrol groups continue with their actions, perhaps just to have something to do. In times of crisis, human societies often turn to a scapegoat, whom they can blame for all of society's evil. Here, cats and dogs are the scapegoat--and we can tell that the patrols enjoy taking action in a helpless situation, getting their "revenge" on the animals by shooting them. (The passage is full of Holocaust imagery, possibly associating the patrol's actions with those of the German Gestapo, which rounded up and murdered millions of Jews, the convenient scapegoats for Germany's problems.)

"My question's this," said Tarrou. "Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering you don't believe in God? I suspect your answer may help me to mine."
His face still in shadow, Rieux said that he'd already answered: that if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him... in this respect Rieux believed himself to be on the right road – in fighting against creation as he found it.

Related Characters: Jean Tarrou, Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Camus offers an eloquent defense of absurdism as the ultimate humanistic doctrine, using Dr. Rieux as something of a mouthpiece for his own beliefs. Tarrou asks the doctor why he spends so much time trying to cure patients and risking his life, when he doesn't even believe in God (and therefore, presumably, doesn't believe in any divinely-ordained morality or duty). Rieux's answer is that it's only *because* he doesn't believe in God--or any other order in the universe--that he devotes so much time to helping other people. Religion, Rieux suggests is a distraction from true human freedom. To believe in God is to put one's trust in another being--an omnipotent being. Religious people don't truly put their full energy into changing the world, because they believe that God can always change it on their behalf. The only truly heroic people are those who accept the terrifying truth about life--and still struggle onward.

"After all," the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, "it's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?"
Tarrou nodded.
"Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all."
Rieux's face darkened.
"Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle."

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial passage, Dr. Rieux continues to explain his philosophy to Jean Tarrou. Tarrou is still having trouble understanding how anyone could deny the existence of God and yet not deny the importance of life. (It's suggested that Tarrou shares a similar worldview to Rieux, but wants Rieux to clarify things so that Tarrou himself can figure out his own beliefs). Rieux explains that those who deny God, such as himself, deny him only to struggle harder against death and suffering. Furthermore, Rieux suggests that even if God *does*exist, it might be more moral to still live out Rieux's philosophy, rather than taking the easy way out and "giving up" by putting things in God's hands--particularly when any God who rules over such a universe of suffering must be sitting in inexplicable "silence."

The major problem with Rieux's belief, as he admits, is that any victories against death, pain, and injustice will always be short-lived. If you don't believe in an eternal Heaven, Tarrou notes, then you can't believe that anything you do really matters--your achievements die along with you. Rieux admits that Tarrou is right, but doesn't see the fact that victories are "never lasting" as a problem in and of itself. the transient nature of success and happiness, on the contrary, is a mandate to keep *trying* to create happiness and success--a struggle that's equal parts heroic and futile.

Those who enrolled in the "sanitary squads," as they were called, had, indeed, no such great merit in doing as they did, since they knew it was the only thing to do, and the unthinkable thing would then have been not to have brought themselves to do it. These groups enabled our townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way some men's duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is, the concern of all.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

As the plague continues to ravage the town, a group of men puts together a sanitation squad whose duty is to fight the plague by keeping the town clean. Camus has no illusions about such a group: he admits that they don't necessarily accomplish anything concrete by trying to fight the plague. And yet the squad accomplishes one very useful thing; it spreads the message that all human beings in the community should be concerned with the plague--it's everybody's responsibility. There's nothing "heroic" about struggling to protect others from plague. Rather, it's just common decency.

The passage is indicative of Camus's absurdist, abstract thinking. Even if there's no way to ward off death or chaos itself--i.e., no way to fight off the plague--it's worthwhile to acknowledge death and continue to struggle against it. By accepting the role of death in the universe, people create a community for themselves, defined by a mutual acceptance of destruction. In a way, everybody in the town of Oran already knows, albeit deep down, that the plague is going to kill them. The sanitation squad, then, isn't giving out any new information--it's just helping people come to terms with the truth about the disease, and (hopefully) encouraging them to do the most human thing possible and fight against it.

Part 3 Quotes

No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

As the history of the plague drags on, people come to realize a few things about their community. There's no sense in celebrating hierarchy or social status anymore, since sooner or later everybody is going to be "equal"--i.e., equally dead. The implication seems to be that there was *never* any point to a social hierarchy--all hierarchy is just a fragile illusion, designed to distract people from their common mortality.

The plague is a great social equalizer, and yet it creates some new feelings of tension and revolt in the town. The people have a hard time accepting that they're all going to die soon--as a result, they lash out, both against the plague itself and against each other. Humans have a hard time accepting the harsh truth about themselves, and they compensate with prejudices and delusions.

Part 4 Quotes

"In short, this epidemic has done him proud. Of a lonely man who hated loneliness it has made an accomplice... He is happily at one with all around him, with their superstitions, their groundless panics, the susceptibilities of people whose nerves are always on the stretch; with their fixed idea of talking the least possible about plague and nevertheless talking of it all the time..."

Related Characters: Jean Tarrou (speaker), Cottard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

Ironically, the plague is good for one resident of the town: Cottard. Cottard is a criminal who committed a serious, unknown crime a long time ago. He's used to being ignored and shunned for his differences--and thus, when the plague hits, he's delighted. Suddenly, everybody is equal, and nobody is trying to arrest him. Furthermore, everybody has become a threat--i.e., a potential carrier of disease. Cottard is no longer so "lonely" then.

The passage reinforces how the plague dissolves all social boundaries. Hierarchy of any kind is just a human illusion--confronted by the harsh facts of death and chaos, the

community of Oran abandons almost all hierarchies altogether, and thus Cottard is no longer such an outcast.

"I understand," Paneloux said in a low voice. "That sort of thing is revolting because it passes our human understanding. But perhaps we should love what we cannot understand."
Rieux straightened up slowly…
"No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture."

Related Characters: Father Paneloux, Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

How should human beings react when evil things happen to good people--when, for instance, innocent children die of a horrible disease? For Camus, there are a couple different responses. One potential response is represented in the character of Father Paneloux, the priest who urges his followers to accept the plague as God's punishment. Paneloux's ideas are characteristic of many organized religions, which accept that evil and suffering are just part of God's plan--i.e., pain is, in the long term, "good."

Camus--and the character whose beliefs are closest to his own, Dr. Rieux--refuses to celebrate or love a God who allows children to die in pain. Camus has some respect for Paneloux, because--just like everybody else in the novel--he tries to find meaning in a meaningless world. And yet Paneloux seems rather cowardly in the way he accepts pain, rather than fighting back against it. Rieux tries to fight the plague, rather than accept it, as Paneloux seems to do.

Tarrou, when told by Rieux what Paneloux had said, remarked that he'd known a priest who had lost his faith during the war, as the result of seeing a young man's face with both eyes destroyed.
"Paneloux is right," Tarrou continued. "When an innocent youth can have his eyes destroyed, a Christian should either lose his faith or consent to having his eyes destroyed. Paneloux declines to lose his faith, and he will go through with it to end. That's what he meant to say."

Related Characters: Jean Tarrou (speaker), Dr. Bernard Rieux, Father Paneloux

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

As Father Paneloux spends more time among the plague-ridden community he finds it harder and harder to continue being religious. Paneloux tells his followers that they must embrace the plague as a part of God's plan. But as Paneloux sees untold horrors--particularly the death of M. Othon's young son--he finds it increasingly difficult to accept this worldview, and he seems to have doubts about the very existence of God. Yet Paneloux continues to believe in God, or at least praise him in public.

Here, Tarrou and Rieux discuss Paneloux's faith, and agree that he has come to an impasse. In the face of such meaningless suffering, the Christian can only deny nothing or deny everything--and Paneloux is afraid to deny everything. Thus he clings ever harder to his desperate trust in God, choosing to believe that even the plague is part of a larger "plan." Paneloux even refuses to call a doctor when he gets sick, sticking to his principles in the face of reality. Tarrou and Rieux actually admire this stubbornness, even though it leads to Paneloux's death, and he may have led others "astray" with his sermons, because Paneloux at least stuck with his beliefs "to the end."

All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilence and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences…

I grant we should add a third category; that of the true healers. But it's a fact one doesn't come across many of them, and anyhow it must be a hard vocation. That's why I decided to take, in every predicament, the victims' side, so as to reduce the damage done. Among them I can at least try to discover how one attains to the third category; in other words, to peace.

Related Characters: Jean Tarrou (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Jean Tarrou seems to be dying from the plague. As a result, his speech is earnest and

philosophical--he knows that he doesn't have much longer. Here, Tarrou lays out his model for life. As he sees it, human beings are always suffering from some kind of plague or pestilence. Sometimes, the plague is very concrete--a war, a disease, a tyrant, etc. In other cases, the plague is more psychological--it could be depression, alienation, or sheer loneliness.

The only way to live, Tarrou insists, is to fight the plague. Such a fight may be a folly, since there will always be some other plague coming along in the end. And yet fighting plague is better than joining forces with it--becoming a bully, an executioner, or a tyrant. Tarrou's description of life is both hopeless and hopeful, and it shows how Camus' philosophy of absurdism--while seemingly depressing and nihilistic at first glance--actually can lead to real-world change and great acts of philanthropy. (Camus himself fought "the plague" by joining the French Resistance against the Nazis during WWII.)

❝ "I'm afraid I did not make myself clear. I'm told there are some voluntary workers from government offices in that camp... It would keep me busy, you see. And also – I know it may sound absurd, but I'd feel less separated from my little boy." Rieux stared at him. Could it be that a sudden gentleness showed in those hard, inexpressive eyes?

Related Characters: M. Othon, Dr. Bernard Rieux (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, M. Othon, a judge and a symbol of order and tyranny, is released from his mandatory quarantine period. Surprisingly, Othon asks to be sent back into the quarantine facilities, despite the fact that he could be risking his life to do so. Othon wants to be close to his son, Jacques, who has recently died from the plague. The passage is interesting for a couple reasons. Othon, who'd always been perceived as a hard, cruel figure, seems to have softened in the face of the plague and his son's loss--he just wants to feel a connection with his lost family. Suffering, if nothing else, brings new humanity and compassion to even the cruelest and harshest human beings.

Part 5 Quotes

❝ "Rieux," he said at last, "you must tell me the whole truth. I count on that."

"I promise it."
Tarrou's heavy face relaxed in a brief smile.
"Thanks. I don't want to die, and I shall put up a fight. But if I lose the match, I want to make a good end of it."

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux, Jean Tarrou (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In the final Part of his novel, Camus faces the overwhelming question--how to die? How, knowing to a certainty that our lives are going to end, do we behave in the years or days or hours leading up to the end? Tarrou offers us one model of how to behave: with dignity, with a fierce struggle, never submitting to the inevitable. Tarrou insists that he will keep fighting, up to the end, despite the fact that his fighting seems to be in vain.

Notice also that Tarrou requires the complete truth from Rieux--he wants Rieux to tell him how much longer he's got, and how bad his condition is. Tarrou celebrates truth, even if it's harsh truth, at all times. Only by accepting the truth about the human condition can people attain a measure of dignity and heroism for themselves.

❝ And with his arms locked around her... he let his tears flow freely, unknowing if they rose from present joy or from sorrow too long repressed; aware only that they would prevent his making sure if the face buried in the hollow of his shoulder was the face of which he had dreamed so often or, instead, a stranger's face. For the moment he wished to behave like all those others around him who believed, or made believe, that plague can come and go without changing anything in men's hearts.

Related Characters: Raymond Rambert

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Tarrou has died of the plague just as the epidemic is

retreating. Rieux is so upset--upset that his brave friend is dead, and that he himself has been unable to do anything about it--that he cries bitterly. Rieux has spent almost the entire novel behavior stoically and collectedly--he's always argued that his detachment is a sign that he's still invested in actually healing people, rather than just feeling sorry for them.

Are Rieux's tears a sign that he's finally given up--that he's finally accepted defeat in the face of an unbeatable disease? Perhaps, but notice that even here, Rieux recognizes that it's important to *respond* to the plague in some way--he wishes that he could pretend, as many people do, that the plague can "come and go" without changing someone in an irrevocable way. At all times, Rieux wants to use his training to fight off the plague, even if only by telling made-up stories about it. Perhaps Rieux's tears are inevitable--no human being can repress his emotions forever; to do so would be a sign of inhumanity, or of not truly facing the suffering and death inherent in life.

> ...Dr. Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

Related Characters: Dr. Bernard Rieux

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel draws to an end, we're told that the book we've just finished was written by Dr. Rieux himself. Rieux has witnessed some horrifying things; people have tried to fight against the plague, and lost. And yet, at the last minute the plague retreats, as suddenly and meaninglessly as it arrived.

Rieux is faced with a challenge: what sort of book should he write about the plague? Should it be happy or sad? Should there be an optimistic ending or not? In the end, Rieux seems to opt for a heroic account of the plague--an account that inspires people to keep struggling in the hopes that their example will inspire others to even greater acts of heroism and dignity. Rieux, if nothing else, is an admirer of human beings--he thinks that for all humans' faults, they're good, noble creatures, capable of almost anything. Rather than allow the plague to retreat into history (like to many other plagues), Rieux will use literature and language to communicate the story of the plague to others. Rieux wants humans to accept their own mortality and fight against it, rather than try to escape it or distract themselves from it.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

The narrator, who is at this point unnamed, begins by describing the city of Oran, a port town on the French Algerian coast of northern Africa. Oran is an ugly town whose occupants are mostly concerned with making money and then spending it on mild pleasures. Overall the narrator emphasizes the town's general banality, although it has an interesting location, resting atop a plateau over a bay, though it "turns its back" on the water.

At the end of the novel the narrator will reveal himself as Dr. Rieux, but he remains unnamed to try to keep his chronicle objective. Despite this, he begins the story by describing Oran in a sardonic way, emphasizing the hollowness of its citizens' lives as they follow the same preset routines of love, work, and entertainment. The sea is often a positive symbol in Camus' writing, so it is significant that Oran turns its back on it, caught up in its own habits.

The narrator promises to reveal his identity later, but for now he wishes to remain objective and distant in chronicling the events that befell Oran during a certain year in the 1940s. He reveals his credentials as narrator by stating that he himself was witness to many of these events, and the rest he heard or read from other firsthand witness.

Camus will later develop the theme of the impossibility of true communication through language, but Rieux still seeks to convey objective truth by writing a detached, journalistic chronicle of the plague. The plague takes place in the 1940s, in the first parallel between the epidemic and WWII, particularly the German occupation of France.

The narrator then launches into the events themselves, beginning with a morning in April. Dr. Bernard Rieux steps out of surgery and finds a dead **rat** on the landing of his apartment. He mentions it to the concierge, M. Michel, who denies that there could be any rats in the building, and insists that someone must have left the dead rat there as a prank.

The plague is foreshadowed by the sinister omen of the dead rats. It is telling that M. Michel denies the first rat, just as the people will try to deny the plague for as long as possible. The rats first appear as symbols of the darker side of humanity and the Absurd, the side that humans try to ignore.

That evening Dr. Rieux sees another **rat** in front of his apartment, this one still alive but with blood spurting from its mouth. Dr. Rieux doesn't pay it much attention, as he is reminded that his wife, who has been ill for a year, is leaving town the next day to go to a sanatorium.

Dr. Rieux experiences a lover's separation even before the plague, when there will be a collective feeling of exile and separation from absent loved ones. The dying rats prefigure the suffering that will soon come to Oran.

The next day M. Michel reports that he found three more dead **rats**, but he has been holding them out as people walk by in the hopes that the pranksters will give themselves away by smiling. Dr. Rieux goes to visit his asthma patient, an old Spaniard who stays in bed all day with two pots of dried peas in his lap. The old man declares that the rats are coming out, and he says that the cause is hunger.

The asthma patient will become an example of the absurdity of life (as he spends all day transferring peas from one bucket to another) and as a sort of mouthpiece for the whims of the public. "Hunger" is no explanation for blood spurting from rats' mouths, but it shows people's need to "rationalize" the ominous rat epidemic.

More people are talking about the dead **rats** around town, but Dr. Rieux is distracted by his wife, who is leaving. Rieux tries to apologize for not looking after her better, but she stops him and says she is hoping to come back healed and make a new start. As she leaves on the train she starts to cry, but Rieux stops her. When he leaves the platform Rieux sees M. Othon, the severe-looking police magistrate, who is with his small son, and who briefly asks Rieux about the rats.

Much of the dialogue between characters in the novel is sparse and restrained like this, which creates a feeling of a struggle to communicate. The inner lives of the characters are much richer than anything they are able to express through words.

That afternoon, a young journalist named Raymond Rambert calls on Dr. Rieux. Rambert wants to discuss his latest report on the sanitary conditions among the Arab population of Oran. Dr. Rieux first wants to make sure Rambert will be able to tell the "unqualified" truth, and when Rambert hesitates Rieux refuses to give him a statement. Rambert is impressed by the doctor's principles, and as they leave Rieux refers him to the story of the dead **rats**.

Camus introduces the main characters before the plague appears and draws them together. Rieux shows a kind of world-weariness here, as he has no time or energy for games and half-truths, but at the same time he reveals his strong principles and practical beliefs – Rambert will get the truth or nothing at all.

Later that day Dr. Rieux passes Jean Tarrou, a man who he has seen before visiting the Spanish dancers who live in Rieux's apartment. Tarrou is watching a **rat** convulse and die on the stairwell, and he and the doctor briefly discuss the rat situation. As he leaves the apartment, Rieux talks to M. Michel, who is still distressed about the rats and is starting to feel ill.

Tarrou first appears here as a curious observer of plague, a role he will continue to play. M. Michel is the first victim of plague, and it is ironic that he is also the one most personally upset by the dead rats – although this is what led him to hold them and probably get their plague-bearing fleas.

The next day Dr. Rieux's mother comes to stay with him to look after the house while his wife is away. She is a calming presence for him, but Rieux is still concerned about the **rats**. He calls Mercier, the man in charge of pest control for the city, and strongly urges him to deal with the situation.

Rieux takes a similar no-nonsense approach as he did with Rambert. Mme. Rieux will become a sort of anti-plague for the doctor, as she remains calm and kind and never seems touched by the epidemic.

The narrator steps back and says that it was from that day forward that the public began to grow uneasy, as the numbers of dying **rats** continued to increase. People demand some action, so the city government sends trucks out to gather the rat bodies and incinerate them. Yet each day more rats emerge from cellars and gutters to die with blood in their mouths.

The sinister epidemic of dying rats would seem like an obvious warning, but the townspeople show the human desire to ignore the Absurd – the plague, or the cruel meaninglessness of life – and maintain their habits and peace of mind.

The phenomenon takes on a menacing feeling and the public begins to panic, but on the day after 8,000 **rat** bodies are gathered up the situation abruptly disappears. That same day, however, Dr. Rieux sees M. Michel looking very sickly and being escorted home by Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest. Rieux briefly examines M. Michel and finds that he is feverish and that his neck, armpits, and groin have developed hard, painful swellings. Rieux sends him home and promises to visit him that afternoon.

As they simply wanted the grotesque situation gotten rid of, the public is relieved that there are no more rats, even though it is a sign that the real human plague has begun. M. Michel's swellings, known as "buboes," are symptoms of the bubonic plague, the same disease that caused millions of deaths throughout history, particularly during the "Black Death" period in Europe.

Later that day Dr. Rieux gets a call from a former patient of his, Joseph Grand, saying that his neighbor has had an accident. When Rieux arrives, he discovers that the neighbor, Cottard, has tried to hang himself. Rieux examines Cottard and says that he will have to inform the police as a formality, but this clearly distresses Cottard. Grand offers to stay with him that night in case he becomes suicidal again.

More characters are introduced. This seemingly random smattering of men will be brought together by the plague. Cottard tries to commit suicide, which in the absurdist worldview is a viable option in dealing with the Absurd, but is ultimately the path of cowardice.

Dr. Rieux visits M. Michel again to find that his condition has worsened. He is now vomiting and extremely thirsty, and the ganglia (hard swellings) on his neck and limbs have grown and darkened. Rieux calls his colleague Dr. Richard, who says he has also had two patients with similar symptoms. That night M. Michel grows more feverish, babbling about the **rats**. The next morning his fever has dropped, but then it suddenly rockets back up. Dr. Rieux calls an ambulance, but M. Michel dies on the way to the hospital.

These will become the all-too familiar symptoms of the plague – the swellings, the thirst, and the fever that drops one morning but then returns with fatal results. M. Michel's last words – cursing the rats – creates an even greater sense of foreboding and impending calamity, and also cements the link between the rats, which people tried to ignore, and the plague that will change their lives.

The narrator marks M. Michel's death as the end of the "first period" of the plague, when the town still tried to pretend nothing was wrong. The narrator then reintroduces Jean Tarrou, who is a visitor to Oran. Tarrou lives in a hotel and makes detailed, inquisitive notes about daily life in the town. The narrator gives some examples, as Tarrou is a good chronicler of the earliest days of the plague. More people succumb to the same sickness as M. Michel in the days following his death, and the public grows more frightened.

Rieux tries to flesh out his journalistic narrative (which is actually quite philosophical) with another source in Tarrou's observations. Tarrou displays a curious inquisitiveness and an eye for mundane details. Rieux's original description of the people of Oran is confirmed by their initial, selfish reaction to the outbreak of plague – trying to ignore it or deny it until the last possible moment.

Tarrou describes an **old man** who lives across from him, who comes out onto his balcony every afternoon and drops some torn up pieces of paper into the street to lure the stray cats below. When a cat approaches, the old man spits at it, and if he hits his target he looks delighted. Tarrou then muses about random things – such as how not to waste time by experiencing something boring or unpleasant, and so appreciating the passing minutes – and when he returns to the old man, it is to say that the cats have recently disappeared, and the old man seems depressed.

This old man is a symbol of Camus' absurdist universe. His actions seem ridiculous and meaningless, but this only emphasizes how all human action is ultimately meaningless. We are all doomed to die, there is no order in the Absurd, so we must create our own meaning – even if it is gaining happiness by spitting on cats – to find any kind of peace or purpose in life.

Tarrou records some conversations about the **rats** and the mysterious illness, and then he describes a family of four who dine at his hotel. The father, M. Othon, is severe and disagreeable, and Tarrou compares him to an owl, his wife to a mouse, and his two small children to performing poodles. Tarrou records a conversation with the hotel manager, who is dismayed by the dead rats and upset that the outbreak of fever has made his hotel just like "everybody else." He says one of his chambermaids has it, but he is certain it isn't contagious. Tarrou then describes Dr. Rieux, which the narrator includes to add accuracy to the narrative.

Tarrou's seemingly mundane observations show how the townspeople initially react to the plague – that is, the Absurd. M. Othon, the extreme of conservativeness, sticks to his tradition and routine as if nothing is wrong. The wealthy, like the hotel manager, are still concerned with maintaining their social status and fear the "equality" that plague might bring. Everyone is in obvious danger, but as the citizens could ignore the rats, so the manager can pretend the disease isn't contagious.

The narrator returns to his own account, and describes Dr. Rieux's calls to Dr. Richard, who is also head of the local medical association, and to some of his other colleagues. Rieux urges Richard to put any new cases with the strange disease into isolation wards, but Richard says the Prefect must issue such an order, so he deflects the concern.

Dr. Richard shares Rieux's job, but he takes a different approach to the plague. Richard prefers the government's (and ultimately the citizens' as well) approach of delaying until the last minute, hoping the plague will not get worse.

The weather grows rainy and damp and the whole town feels feverish and exhausted, except for Rieux's Spanish patient, who welcomes it for his asthma. Rieux returns to check on Grand and Cottard, and he waits in Grand's room for the police inspector to show up. While they wait Grand says that he has been practicing Latin, and that he did not know Cottard very well.

The weather is often linked to the plague in the novel, as the hot weather coincides with its peak and the coming of winter with its decline. But this is just another example of the Absurd, as the weather is just as unordered and unconcerned with humanity as disease is.

The police inspector arrives and Grand grows very anxious choosing the right words for his statement about Cottard. He settles on the phrase "a secret grief" to describe Cottard's troubles. The inspector then questions Cottard, who appears very nervous and complains that he is being disturbed. The inspector replies that it is Cottard who is disturbing the peace of others.

From the start Cottard is paranoid and fears punishment – another kind of plague – as he has committed some crime in the past. Grand starts to exhibit his preoccupation with language. Through him Camus will develop the idea that true communication is impossible, but that it is still vital to keep trying.

More people come down with the mysterious illness, and Dr. Rieux visits them to lance the swellings on their necks, groins, and armpits. A mixture of blood and pus comes out, and most of the sick people die painfully. The newspapers, which have wildly reported about the rats, remain silent on the disease.

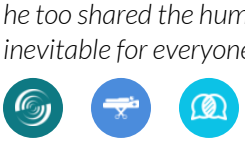
As the newspapers remain silent, the public still collectively tries to deny the growing epidemic. Camus emphasizes the suffering of the plague victims and the horror of the disease, which is the potential horror of the Absurd and the human condition.

Dr. Castel, one of Dr. Rieux's older colleagues, visits him and they discuss the illness. They both think it is bubonic plague, but they are afraid to name it, and Castel predicts that the government will try to deny it to avoid alarming people. Rieux agrees – the common myth is that the plague had vanished from "temperate climates," but in reality there was an outbreak in Paris just twenty years before. Rieux hopes that this outbreak will not be as bad as others.

This is the first time the word "plague" is spoken, and Rieux notes the importance of the moment. While true communication is impossible through language, words and the lack thereof still have power. Fear of the word "plague" and the silence of the newspapers makes the epidemic even more ominous in its namelessness.

The narrator notes the importance of the word "plague" being spoken for the first time. He says that plagues, like wars, have always existed among humans, yet we manage to be surprised every time a new one comes. Even though Rieux has seen several people die already, he is still caught unawares just like most of the populace – no one believes it could really happen to them. The people of Oran continue to go about their business, confident that nothing too terrible could be coming.

Rieux makes the first explicit connection between war and plague. Many critics see the plague as an allegory for the Nazi occupation of France in WWII, when Camus himself fought and wrote for the French Resistance. Rieux is writing this in hindsight, and admits that he too shared the human trait of trying to deny the Absurd. Death is inevitable for everyone, but it still always comes as a surprise.



Dr. Rieux recalls what he has read about the disease, and tries to make sense of the horrifying statistics. He finds he cannot even comprehend the idea of a hundred million deaths – the result of the worst plagues – and he tries imagining such numbers as individual faces, or the physical length of each body. Rieux looks out the window at the tranquil sky and imagines scenes of death and destruction throughout history. He braces himself, and resolves to do what must be done to fight the plague.

Rieux's imaginings of plague – like the book he could have written, had he not tried to remain objective – are sentimental and grandiose, while the chronicle will show that the true horror of plague is its crushing banality and inevitability. Rieux shows his practical courage by banishing these grand images and focusing on what needs to be done – the immediate measures that must be taken to slow the epidemic.

Joseph Grand visits Dr. Rieux, as it is his job (as a Municipal clerk) to count up the daily deaths, and he is accompanied by Cottard. Grand tells Rieux that the numbers of deaths are going up. Rieux offers that they accompany him to the laboratory and "call this disease by its name," but Grand excuses himself, as he must return home to work on some secretive activity. After he leaves, Rieux tries to imagine a man like Grand in a time of plague, and feels sure that he would survive.

Camus presents Grand as an anti-hero, a mediocre, strange sort of everyman who still contains the practical goodness and daily heroism that is the best response to plague (or the absurdity of life). Rieux recognizes the importance of the plague's name, but even he still seems afraid to say it and create panic.

The narrator describes Grand, who is tall and thin and wears clothes that are too big for him. When he accepted his menial job twenty-two years before, he was promised a promotion to a better-paying position. But by the time Grand became dissatisfied with his continuing low salary, the head of his department had died and Grand himself could not remember the terms of his agreement. He can never seem to express himself or get things done because he can never "find his words." He weighed each word obsessively before trying to write a letter of protest to his job, and in the end the letter was never written.

Grand's defining characteristic, other than his humanity, is his inability to express himself. He weighs each word interminably, and has missed out on large opportunities in life because of his lack of language. With this theme Camus associates the world of language with the absurd universe, as it is impossible to find the perfect words to truly communicate between two souls, but we must still keep struggling to do so.

Grand eventually settled into his austere lifestyle. He still experienced deep emotions and performed kind acts, but could never properly express himself. He brings up his struggle with words every time he sees Dr. Rieux. Back in the present, Rieux watches Grand leave and intuits that Grand is writing a book of some kind. He feels vaguely comforted, as Grand and his eccentricities seem like the antithesis of plague.

Rieux already recognizes Grand as the potential "hero" of the story. He sees that the battle against plague will not consist of heroic acts, but of everyday courage and a strength drawn from finding one's own meaning in life. At the same time Rieux allows himself to indulge the idea that the plague will act rationally, and spare harmless citizens like Grand.

The next day Dr. Rieux convinces the government to call a meeting about the health situation, and he wires to Paris to request a plague serum. The doctors meet with the Prefect, and Rieux and Castel are the strongest voices urging immediate action and insisting that the illness is the plague. Dr. Richard drags his feet, saying they are still unsure, and the Prefect also wants to continue with the "wait and see" policy. Rieux insists, saying that half the population could be killed. Finally the doctors agree to officially declare the epidemic as plague, and the Prefect agrees to take preventative measures.

The other doctors act like the public did with the rat situation – everyone wants someone else to deal with the problem, so that no one has to grow alarmed or disrupt the status quo. Dr. Rieux is again practical and forward, as his concern is saving as many lives as possible – it doesn't matter if the plague is the precise bubonic plague of history, what matters is that it might take thousands of lives.

After that the newspapers begin to discreetly mention the disease, but the authorities do not take much immediate action. A few official notices warning of fever appear, but not in any well-attended areas. The basic government response consists of exterminating the **rats** and sending anyone with a fever to a special isolation ward of the hospital. Meanwhile the death toll continues to rise.

The "preventative measures" seem more designed to appease Rieux and Castel (and the public fear of the rats) than to actually protect the town from plague. Despite the facts, humans always prefer to deny plague and imagine that their ordered existence will continue unobstructed by the Absurd.

Dr. Rieux visits Grand again and asks him about Cottard. Grand says that Cottard has been acting strangely gregarious lately, as if trying to make allies out of people around town. Grand and Rieux guess that Cottard has some serious crime weighing on his conscience, and he is trying to protect himself from punishment.

Cottard already suffers from the "plague" of guilt and fear of punishment, so he will show an affinity with the epidemic later. Grand and Cottard are both examples of ineffective communication – Grand labors over writing alone in his room, while Cottard only makes friends to try and protect himself from arrest.

The plague serum still has not come, and Dr. Rieux finally realizes that he himself is feeling afraid. Like Cottard, he feels the need for random human contact. He then visits Cottard, who acts strangely paranoid about people "taking an interest in him," and asks the doctor if he could be arrested while at the hospital. They then discuss the epidemic, and Cottard suddenly shouts that the town needs an earthquake.

Though in many ways a unique figure, Dr. Rieux still feels the shifts of emotion that the plague brings to Oran. The sense of fear and isolation comes with a need for human contact, while at the same time there is constant distrust of other people. This is like Cottard, already "plague-stricken," seeking out friends but suspicious of everyone.

All day Dr. Rieux visits patients who seem almost hostile to his presence, and he feels more weighed down by his work than ever before. He visits his asthma patient at night, and the old man excitedly suggests that the epidemic is cholera. Rieux sits in the old man's dining room and thinks about how the government's precautions are woefully inadequate, unless the plague should suddenly die out on its own.

The asthma patient acts as a mouthpiece for the general public here, as he completely misses the mark in diagnosing the illness. The government can only act in hindsight, as people continue to assume that an epidemic will act rationally.

Dr. Rieux keeps pressing Richard and the Prefect to take more drastic measures in dealing with the plague, but they continue to drag their feet. After the epidemic increases to more than thirty deaths a day, the Prefect agrees to enforce more sanitation and quarantine regulations. The serum arrives, but it is only enough for immediate cases.

Plagues, like wars, are not rational in the random suffering and death they cause, but humans still assume that no catastrophe will disrupt their ordered world – even though wars and plagues appear constantly throughout history.

The weather grows warm and clear, and from the outside it seems like a normal spring in Oran. People continue to live their lives as they usually do, and they go about their business pretending nothing is wrong. Suddenly the death toll spikes sharply upward and the Prefect declares a state of plague, and orders that the town must be closed off and quarantined.

Oran's preoccupation with its own "peace of mind" causes it to be indifferent to suffering until the last possible minute. This ends the first stage of the plague, and moves the town into a new state of exile and imprisonment.

PART 2

Once the gates of the town are shut, the plague becomes everyone's concern – no one is trying to ignore it anymore. People immediately react to their sudden isolation by yearning for their loved ones outside Oran. No is even allowed to write letters lest the plague spread through the mail. People can only send brief telegrams, and they soon give up this as well, as they cannot express much in only ten words.

Critics have compared the quarantine of Oran to the German occupation of France during WWII, and it is likely that Camus did draw on his war experiences for the novel. Both represent the cruel, meaningless catastrophes of life, and the suffering and death that is inevitable. The importance of communication becomes clear only when it is taken away.

Loved ones who are abroad may return to Oran, but then they cannot leave again, so no one is willing to put their lives in danger for the comfort of closeness. Only Dr. Castel's wife returns to Oran to be with her husband. Other couples begin to be jealous of their lovers who are away, and give more thought and consideration to their relationship.

The closing of the town gates makes the plague everyone's business, but the townspeople are still too wrapped up in themselves to see this. Instead of trying to ignore plague and stick to their habits, they now feel they are unique in their suffering and bereavement.

It is this feeling of exile that is the first result of the plague. People walk aimlessly about town, feeling like prisoners, but also like there is a void inside of them that they can only fill with nostalgic memories. People quickly stop trying to speculate how long the epidemic will last – if someone pessimistically assumes six months, they then realize that there is no reason it should not last even longer. When they think of the present they grow impatient and frustrated, the past brings them regret and longing, and the future is filled with uncertainty and despair.

Camus makes more comparisons between war and plague. The citizens feel both exiled and imprisoned, as they are separated from loved ones and normal life, but also trapped inside their own homes and unable to escape. Camus spends a lot of the book musing about the general public's reaction to the Absurd – after the stage of denial comes this sentimentality and despair.

The narrator compares those exiled in their own town to those physically exiled like Rambert, who have only memories of their homes. Parted lovers grow remorseful of their past mistakes and think of how they could have done better. Each person becomes so preoccupied with his or her own personal suffering that they all feel alone and isolated, even though the whole town is in the same predicament. People find themselves unable to express their personal distress and feelings to each other. This selfish despair at least prevents a mass panic, however.

The importance of language again comes into play as the townspeople (like Grand) cannot "find the right words" to describe their suffering. They feel that if they spoke it aloud, their pain would become common and mundane. Instead people want to feel unique, like they are suffering more than and differently from others, when in reality the plague has become the human condition now, the natural state of existence in Oran.

At the gates and ports ships and travelers are being turned away, so that all commerce is halted by the plague. People first deal with the quarantine by growing irritated and abusing the government. They are unable to comprehend the daily number of deaths, as no one knows the usual death rate or likes to think about it, so people can still act as if the plague is something frustrating but temporary. The cafes and movie theaters are always full, as the public tries to occupy their lonely leisure and distract themselves from plague. People begin to drink heavily as well.

As when Rieux tried to imagine the astronomical death tolls of the plagues of history, the townspeople are unable to truly comprehend the deaths of their fellow citizens. In plague, like war, the suffering and death can take on such a massive scale that the mind balks at it. This is the Absurd that Camus confronts us with in the novel – a vast, meaningless, uncaring universe that we must deal with in some way.

Cottard is the only person who seems in a better mood because of the plague. He talks excitedly to Dr. Rieux about how long the epidemic might last. Grand also confesses his past to Rieux, explaining that when he was young he had married a poor girl named Jeanne. They fell in love while looking at a shop window at Christmas time. After they were married they continued to love each other, but they both had to work so hard that they eventually forgot their feelings, and Jeanne left Grand. She left a letter explaining that she was fond of him but very tired, and she needed a new start.

Cottard represents those in France who collaborated with the Germans, as Cottard delights in the plague's appearance and will soon begin to work alongside it. Grand shows how his inability to express himself properly has cost him his marriage to Jeanne as well as a better job and success as a writer.

Since then Grand, too, had been trying to make a new start, and had struggled for years to write a letter to Jeanne justifying himself. But as usual he cannot find the right words. Grand weeps as he tells Dr. Rieux all this. That night Rieux sends a telegram to his wife explaining the plague situation.

Grand can be a comedic figure in his eccentricities, but he is also a sort of hero, cursed by his inability to communicate but still struggling on to find the right words.

One evening the journalist Rambert reintroduces himself to Dr. Rieux. He says he is determined to escape Oran to rejoin the woman he loves in Paris. He had tried to use his influence as a journalist to convince the authorities that he didn't belong in Oran, he was only there by chance, but the government refused to let him leave. Rambert declares that he was put on earth only to love this woman, so he is not being fulfilled while quarantined. He asks Rieux to give him a certificate stating that he is free of plague, but Rieux refuses.

Rambert, like the rest of Oran, still cannot perceive the absurdity of the plague. He expects plague to be fair or rational and excuse him for not really belonging in Oran. Of the protagonists, Rambert has the most achievable goal in life, as he only seeks happiness through human love. Rieux must hold to his principles, as if he allowed the plague to spread beyond Oran it could cause thousands more deaths.

Dr. Rieux acknowledges that Rambert is in an absurd situation, but there is nothing he can do. Rambert grows upset and accuses Rieux of speaking too abstractly and not understanding the individual suffering of the heart. He argues that the interest of the public is a collection of private, individual interests. The doctor seems distracted, and Rambert apologizes for losing his temper, and they part ways.

Rambert is also like the other citizens in that he is totally preoccupied with his personal suffering. He cannot see the plague as a public calamity, but only as an obstacle in the way of his own happiness. Rieux indulges in this a little, but overall he is better at seeing the big picture than most.

Dr. Rieux muses on the conversation and whether he really is living in a "world of abstractions" even while spending all day at the hospital treating plague victims. He accepts that a kind of "divorce from reality" is necessary to deal properly with the plague, as otherwise it would be overwhelming. Still Dr. Rieux struggles on, one case at a time.

Rieux recognizes that plague itself is a kind of abstraction, as it exists also in potential suffering, fear, and exile, and so in a way he must deal with it abstractly as well as practically. The doctor is rational as ever, and tries to dispense with sentimentality when it gets in the way of what is important – fighting plague.

The emergency hospitals, which include a requisitioned schoolhouse, are all full now, and there is a swift system for cleansing and isolating plague patients. At night Dr. Rieux goes out to make house calls, and there is always a tragic, emotional scene when he is forced to evacuate people with the plague and isolate them from their families. The families beg him to have pity, but Dr. Rieux can no longer afford to indulge in pity – to fight abstraction he must dwell also in abstraction.

Dr. Rieux's struggle against the plague is the prime example of Camus' absurdist philosophy. Even though there is little Rieux can do for the victims, as no serum is effective and the disease is usually fatal, he still keeps working, fighting against death and suffering even in the face of defeat. Rieux dispenses even with pity and philosophy, leaving all his energy for defiance.

After a month of plague, Father Paneloux declares he will deliver a sermon on the subject. The town has grown more pious and superstitious in the time of crisis, and the cathedral is packed when Father Paneloux goes to preach. In his sermon he declares that the plague is a punishment sent by God, and that the people of Oran deserve it, as they have been sinful and scorned God. He hopes that they will learn from the disease, which is like a harvesting angel separating good from evil.

Paneloux offers another option of how to confront the Absurd – he rationalizes it and tries to see a divine order in even the greatest of calamities. Paneloux truly dwells in abstraction, and so can justify the plague, as he has not yet seen its ravages firsthand. The irony is that a plague death is no more meaningful than any other death, and the citizen's lives before the plague still mostly involved entertaining themselves until death came, all the while trying to deny death's existence.

The result of the sermon is that people feel more and more that they are trapped and being punished, and so they try harder to escape or revolt. In being treated like criminals, they begin to act like criminals. The true nature of the situation begins to dawn on the public and mass panic begins to grow.

Paneloux's sermon makes people feel like prisoners being punished for some sin they don't feel guilty for. They respond to this with revolt, but not the heroic revolt of Rieux – instead a selfish sense of injustice and panic.

Rieux and Grand go to a café to discuss the situation, and Grand explains the nature of his secretive work – he is trying to write a book, a manuscript so perfect that when the publisher reads it he will say "Hats off!" But so far he has only written the first sentence, and even that he is constantly struggling over and reworking. Rieux follows Grand back to his house and Grand shows him the sentence, which concerns a horsewoman in May. Grand discusses the importance of each word, while outside more people try to escape Oran, and there is occasional violence.

Grand's quest for the perfect manuscript is similar to the quest to defeat the plague and death – ultimately hopeless. Many of the citizens despair because they know they are helpless against the plague, but Camus advocates another way of dealing with the Absurd, to keep struggling against the plague and the imperfections of language, and create one's own meaning and happiness from that struggle.

Rambert also continues his attempts to escape, but keeps being held up by red tape. He is briefly hopeful when he is given a form to fill out about his identity and family, but then he learns that is only to be used in case he dies of plague. Rambert is amazed that the bureaucracy functions as usual despite the plague. He eventually grows lethargic and hopeless, and drifts from café to café. He often goes to the deserted train station and dreams of Paris and the woman he loves.

Rambert first attempts to escape using the government's help, feeling that it is his "right" to leave Oran, as he is a visitor there. It is telling that the bureaucracy continues to function during the plague, as the ultimate symbol of habit and tradition denying the Absurd.

Soon after Father Paneloux's sermon summer descends on Oran with scorching heat and a sharp increase in the number of plague victims. The sound of groaning victims drifts into the street, but no one stops anymore to listen out of curiosity or pity. There have been violent attempts to escape at the gates, and long prison terms are now the punishment for rebellion. The people realize that the hot weather will favor the plague, and so any pleasure they might have gotten from the summer is destroyed.

The weather is again associated with the plague, and the summer heat increases the feelings of tension and imprisonment in Oran. The townspeople are already growing "bored" of the suffering of the plague, as it is no longer sensational and new, so the epidemic increases in its crushing drudgery and despair.

The narrator returns to some of Tarrou's observations. The death toll is now announced daily rather than weekly so that the numbers seem smaller. Tarrou records a woman opening her window, screaming twice, and then shutting it. **The man who spits on cats** has lost his pastime, as the cats have all been killed as possible carriers of fleas or plague. He looks sad and bewildered for a few days, and after that he does not appear on his balcony again.

Tarrou's observations seem strange, but he is the one with the most experience of "plague," and so he records more interesting reactions to it. The man who spits on cats has been robbed of his meaningful action, absurd though it was, and he gives up in the face of the plague.

Tarrou reports that the hotel manager has lost most of his customers and is depressed by the thought that only cold weather will stamp out the plague, as it never truly gets cold in Oran. M. Othon continues to dine at the hotel restaurant even though his wife is in quarantine, and the manager says Othon is "under suspicion." Tarrou also describes the kindness of Dr. Rieux's mother, declaring that such goodness will "always triumph over plague."

People continue to be distrustful and selfish, refusing to accept the plague as a common bond. The manager still wants to keep the divide between rich and poor, and between those who are suspicious (because contagious) or not, when in reality everyone is in the same predicament now. Even Tarrou cannot help rationalizing the plague a little in his thoughts on Mme. Rieux.

Tarrou goes with Dr. Rieux to visit his asthma patient. The old man gleefully explains that the world is "topsy-turvy" now, with "more doctors than patients." Tarrou records the old man's account of his life – at age fifty he decided he had worked enough for a lifetime, and since then he has stayed in bed all day. He hates watches, so he marks the passage of time by transferring dried peas from one saucepan into another. He has never left Oran, and seems totally content with his life of strict habits. Tarrou muses that the man is perhaps a saint in some ways.

The asthma patient's routine of counting peas is similar to Tarrou's musing on "wasting time." The old man fully experiences the passage of time, but he fills it with a totally useless, meaningless routine. This is an extreme example of the people of Oran as Rieux originally described them, wasting their days in boring habits and trying to ignore suffering and death.

Tarrou notes that no one laughs out loud anymore except for drunk people. A new newspaper has been launched called the *Plague Chronicle*, which claims to keep the public informed about the epidemic but actually contains mostly advertisements for "infallible antidotes" against the disease. Still people buy up all the newspapers.

The townspeople are still seeking distraction or trying to blame someone else instead of confronting the plague directly. The newspapers that sensationalized the rats and then ignored the epidemic now shift with the public mood.

Tarrou observes that people seem to try to counteract the plague by living extravagantly, spending large sums on expensive meals and wines. In the evenings the streets are empty now. Tarrou muses that when the epidemic began people first thought of religion, but now they turn to desperately pursuing pleasure.

People try to distract themselves from plague by indulging in pleasure, but the irony is that this is very much how the people of Oran lived before the epidemic – ignoring suffering and death and focusing on routine and banal diversions.

One evening Dr. Rieux watches his mother, who seems so tranquil and resigned, and he thinks about the routine of his days. The new serum from Paris seems less effective, and the plague has become pneumonic and more contagious. Rieux suddenly feels great affection for his mother, but they only exchange a few words. Rieux has gotten a telegram from his wife, but he thinks she is covering up her poor health to keep him from worrying.

Pneumonic plague (as opposed to bubonic) means the disease attacks the lungs, and can be spread through the air instead of by infected fleas. It seems that Dr. Rieux's efforts are in vain, yet he still keeps working. Rieux's relationship with his mother echoes the struggle to communicate in the novel, as they love each other but can never speak of it.

Tarrou arrives and proposes a plan to recruit volunteers for an anti-plague effort, a group of sanitation workers dealing directly with plague victims. Rieux is grateful for the offer, but asks Tarrou if he has considered the dangers of such work. Tarrou responds by asking what Rieux thought of Father Paneloux's sermon. Rieux says he hates the idea of "collective punishment." The plague can sometimes make people "rise above themselves," but it brings with it so much suffering that there is no choice but to fight against it.

Tarrou and Rieux act out the only truly human response to the Absurd, taking action against the plague even in the face of defeat. As a doctor, Rieux has seen all the horror of the Absurd, but he still chooses to fight against suffering because it is human nature to cling to life. He cannot accept that the horrors of plague are part of a divine scheme – this is too abstract for someone dealing directly with suffering and death.

Tarrou then asks Dr. Rieux if he believes in God, and Rieux answers by saying that Paneloux is a man of learning, separated from real suffering and death, so he has the privilege of believing in absolute truth. Tarrou asks why Rieux is so devoted to healing people if he doesn't believe in God, and Rieux responds by saying it is *because* he doesn't believe in God that he must work so hard. If there was an all-powerful God, he could heal everyone, but as it is humans must fight the plague themselves.

Rieux does not condemn Paneloux as evil or cowardly, but merely ignorant, as the priest has not experienced the plague directly, or the suffering and death it brings without reason or mercy. The only absolute truth for Rieux and Tarrou is that the plague is a collective disaster, an evil that is everyone's business, so they must work together to fight it.

Rieux suggests that it might be better to keep struggling against death, regardless of whether a silent God exists or not. Tarrou reminds him that any struggle against death is ultimately futile, but Rieux says that that is no reason to give up. After a while Tarrou says he agrees with the doctor's opinion, and confidently says he "has little left to learn." Rieux warns him that he has only a one-in-three chance of surviving if he works to fight the plague, and asks Tarrou why he has volunteered himself. Tarrou responds that it is his code of morals, which is merely "comprehension."

As atheists, Tarrou and Rieux do not believe in any afterlife or heavenly reward for their struggle, so they try to live totally in the here and now, fighting for life and humanity. Again Camus equates evil with ignorance and morality with comprehension, implying that sympathy and healing are the only viable option if one truly understands the nature of things. It is only in being ignorant of plague that most people refuse to fight plague.

Tarrou's plan works and a group of volunteers soon starts working, but the narrator tries not to exaggerate the heroism of their efforts, as that would make them seem exceptional. He believes that people are more good than bad, and that all vices basically stem from ignorance. Thus he tries to view the volunteers with objectivity as well as praise. He implies that it was "unthinkable" to not try to fight the plague, so the volunteers were merely doing the decent, fully human thing.

While the novel (and the absurdist worldview) is often bleak and crushing, Camus still maintains an optimistic attitude with his faith in the human spirit. Again, comprehension is shown as more valuable than good intention, as once one truly comprehends the plague, the only decent thing to do is to fight it. In this Camus both lowers the ideal of heroism to the everyday and elevates common decency to the heroic.

Dr. Castel begins working on an anti-plague serum using the local bacillus, which is slightly different from the textbook plague microbe. Grand acts as a general secretary for the sanitation squads. Grand has "nothing of the hero about him," so it is he who most embodies the anti-plague effort – he realizes there is nothing to be done but struggle on. As he works he keeps refining the first sentence of his book, changing adjectives with great consideration.

Camus then shows examples of the small bits of heroism that add up to fight the plague. He emphasizes Grand, as Grand is not a natural "healer" like Dr. Rieux, and he has already been struggling against the Absurd in language by trying to write the perfect manuscript.

The narrator knows that readers will want examples of a "heroic" character, so he offers Grand, with his simple goodness and absurd ideal of expression, as an "insignificant and obscure hero." Dr. Rieux muses on the difference between this kind of heroism – the small, necessary kind – and the grandiose speeches he hears on the radio about the plague.

Grand is an average, eccentric everyman who embodies the struggle that every human must make against suffering, death, and meaninglessness. This is why Camus does not want to call the volunteers "heroes," lest it make their actions seem exceptional, when in reality they are necessary at all times.

Meanwhile Rambert grows frustrated with the government and starts looking for illegal means of escaping Oran. Cottard offers to help him, as since the plague began Cottard has been smuggling in contraband and selling it at exorbitant prices. He has made many friends in the criminal underworld by now, and he takes Rambert to a café where they meet a man named Garcia.

Rambert is still operating under the illusion of individual choice. He is not being cowardly or evil in trying to escape Oran – he simply does not comprehend the plague yet, or understand that it affects all people together, regardless of their personal happiness or love.

Garcia walks with Rambert and Cottard and then puts Rambert in touch with a man named Raoul, who he will have to meet the next day. Cottard says he hopes that Rambert will "put in a word" for him in exchange for his help, but he doesn't understand why Rambert is so eager to leave Oran, as Cottard himself has thrived during the plague.

At first it simply seems that Cottard is so pleased because he has used the plague to make a lot of money smuggling, but Tarrou will later examine the philosophical reasons that Cottard embraces the epidemic as well.

Rambert meets with Raoul, who puts him in touch with more members of the criminal underworld. Rambert has to wait days between each meeting and he grows more impatient, though he befriends a criminal named Gonzales through their mutual love of football. While he waits for his escape to be arranged, Rambert discusses the plague with Dr. Rieux, who is exhausted and short of equipment and manpower. Rambert feels guilty for leaving, but he explains again that he is just following his heart.

Rambert has a less lofty ideal than Rieux, as Rambert only seeks the happiness apportioned to him by loving this one woman in Paris. Rieux and Tarrou, on the other hand, are trying to struggle against death and the absurd state of nature. Camus was a great player and lover of football (soccer), and he drew many lessons about bravery and equality from the game.

Rambert has more delays in his escape plan, but he finally meets Marcel and Louis, who are sentries willing to smuggle him out for a large fee. They arrange another meeting, and while he waits Rambert goes with Tarrou to see Dr. Rieux. Late that night they go to a bar and Rambert drinks heavily. Tarrou suggests that Rambert might be able to help with the anti-plague effort, but this makes Rambert grow stubborn and quiet, and ends the conversation.

Rambert is clearly wrestling with his own decision to escape Oran, as he both grows frustrated with the delays and starts to comprehend the collective nature of the plague. He is not like Cottard, and can see beyond his own personal suffering to recognize the plight of others.

The next day Rambert's escape plan is delayed again, as he cannot find Gonzales, Marcel, or Louis. He decides to start all over again, and goes back to Cottard, who is meeting Rieux the next day. Cottard remarks that the sanitation leagues don't seem to be making much difference, and that "once you have plague your number's up." Rieux and Tarrou respond that it is the duty of everyone to help fight the plague.

Cottard represents a cowardly way of confronting the Absurd – surrendering to it and giving up. This often means suicide, which Cottard already attempted, but it also means complicity with the Absurd, as by refusing to fight plague he is increasing its power.

Tarrou asks Cottard why he doesn't join the anti-plague league, and Cottard, offended, says it isn't his job, and the plague suits him fine. Tarrou suggests that Cottard would be arrested for some past crime if the plague hadn't come up. Cottard grows upset that they all know his secret, but then he confesses that he is indeed guilty of a crime, and that was why he tried to hang himself.

Cottard is not evil, but he cannot see past his obsession with his own suffering. He enjoys the plague because it means he is no longer alone in his pain, and he feels no obligation to help his fellow citizens with anything that doesn't immediately concern him.

Rambert gets Cottard to help him again, and they make contact with Garcia, who suggests that Gonzales and the sentries might live in one of the districts that were recently quarantined. They begin to start the whole process over again, which depresses Rambert. Tarrou and Dr. Rieux visit him that night, and he says that the plague is essentially "the same thing over and over and over again."

The longer he is delayed in his plan, the more time Rambert has to muse over the nature of the plague and his own connection with the rest of Oran. Rambert's description of plague links it to the routines of the citizens before the plague arrived, as they just kept repeating the same habits over and over to fill up time.

Rambert muses to Dr. Rieux and Tarrou that he stopped believing in heroism during the Spanish Civil War, where he fought for the losing side. He is only interested in a man if he is capable of "great emotion," such as dying for love, rather than dying for an idea. Rieux responds that "man isn't an idea," but Rambert retorts that man is an idea if he turns his back on love.

The protagonists all have different backstories that have led them to their similar philosophical worldviews. Rambert also takes a practical view of the universe, but he is less ambitious than Rieux or Tarrou. He looks no farther than human love for his sense of happiness and peace.

Dr. Rieux insists that fighting the plague is not an attempt at heroism, but simply "common decency." Then he goes out, and Tarrou reveals to Rambert that Rieux's wife is away at a sanatorium. This surprises Rambert, and he offers to join the anti-plague effort at least until he can escape Oran.

Rambert is a decent enough human that when he understands the plague is everyone's concern (not just for "heroes") he volunteers to help fight it. He also clearly feels guilty when he learns that Rieux is in a similar situation but elects to remain in Oran rather than escape to his wife.

PART 3

By mid-August people no longer feel like individuals – the plague has swallowed everything and become a collective disaster. Heavy winds sweep through the town, and the plague begins striking the wealthier districts just as much as the poorer ones. Some people return from quarantine and set fire to their houses, trying to destroy the plague, and the government creates heavy prison sentences for arson. Imprisonment is basically a death sentence, as close groups of people are most susceptible to plague. The guards die just as frequently as the prisoners, as the plague delivers "impartial justice."

The plague strikes people from all social classes and positions, which only highlights the absurdity and arbitrariness of such hierarchies. The plague is just one incarnation of death, which is an omnipresent "collective disaster," so the hierarchies were basically absurd before the plague as well. The arsonists are similar to the suicides, giving in to despair in the face of the Absurd.

Other group communities like the soldiers' barracks and the monks' monasteries have been disbanded, which leads to more feelings of exile. There is more violence at the town gates, and houses that have been burned or quarantined are looted. The only rule that people actually seem to follow is the curfew, as by eleven the streets are empty and dead.

Every aspect of uniqueness and individuality is slowly subsumed by plague and all the citizens of Oran begin to share a truly communal experience of horror and suffering. People are afraid of the dark like they were as children.

The narrator discusses the burial system at that time. At first, funerals are shortened and stripped of ceremony to make burials more efficient, as the death toll is so high. When the fatalities increase and coffins grow scarce, the government is forced to bury victims in mass graves – first there are separate pits for men and for women, but in the end all are dumped together and covered with quicklime. Burial workers also experience a high mortality rate, so the government pays them high wages as incentive.

In death as well as life, any social hierarchies or sense of individuality is stripped away by the plague. The sheer number of bodies and the necessity of disposing of them so grotesquely begins to prove to the public that the plague is anything but rational or divinely sent. The mass graves are another echo of war and military occupation.

When there is no more space left in the cemeteries, the authorities have to start cremating the bodies of the victims, and a grotesque cloud hangs over parts of the city. Fortunately the death toll does not rise again after the crematorium reaches capacity, and they are not forced to take more drastic measures.

The people of Oran are cremated just as those same people had incinerated the rats months before. The images of the plague-stricken city grow even bleaker, if possible.

Because of this constant death and dehumanization, the public sinks into depression and people begin to forget their absent loved ones. The plague crushes even memories of happiness and hope for the future, and everyone grows listless and weary. Those who had felt so alone and unique in their suffering now begin to speak of it and feel that they are all of "common stock." The parted lovers lose "love's egoism" and join the dreary, collective suffering of the public.

Under this crushing weight of suffering and death the people of Oran are finally forced to confront the Absurd. They must recognize that the plague (basically death, or the meaninglessness of the universe) is the state of nature for everyone, so they must lose any selfishness they had in their pain. The town has now become a true community, united by despair.

PART 4

September and October come and the weeks drag on. Dr. Rieux and his friends realize how tired they are, as they ceaselessly work against the plague. Grand often talks to Rieux about Jeanne, and Rieux in turn finds himself talking about his own wife. He wires the sanatorium authorities and finds that his wife's condition has worsened, as he suspected.

Dr. Rieux is so absorbed in the plague that it is easy to forget that he is in the same situation as Rambert, separated from his life partner. The relationship between Rieux and his wife is not explored much except as an example that the doctor, too, experiences all the varied suffering of Oran.

Dr. Rieux is forced to harden himself against the desperate families of the plague victims, as he must save all his energy for saving lives and dispensing information. His sleeplessness saves him from growing overly sentimental and giving in to despair. All the workers are so weary that they grow lax in their own inoculations and sanitation habits.

Rambert was almost right in accusing Rieux of hardening himself against the human heart, as Rieux is forced to dispense with pity and sentimentality when they get in the way of his work. He also has to repress his own suffering as he learns of his wife's worsening state.

The only man in town who seems content is Cottard. Tarrou offers a sympathetic ear, so Cottard spends time with him and Tarrou takes notes in his diary. He explains that Cottard has always lived in a state of fear, as he distrusts everyone as a possible police informant, but at the same time he needs human contact. He has "blossomed" during the plague, as the whole town is now in the state Cottard is used to – craving human contact, but distrustful of others as possible plague-carriers. There are also no more police concerned with past crimes, so Cottard is temporarily a free and innocent man, and he rejoices in the sense of community the plague creates.

Cottard feels less alone now that others share his paranoid state of mind, but he never really breaks free from his isolation. He feels like part of the crowd, but he is still unable to make any meaningful connections with other humans or recognize his duty to fight the plague on behalf of all the townspeople. In a similar way the people of Oran remain isolated by their distrust of others as possible plague-carriers, even though they are unified by the state of plague.

Tarrou records an incident at the Municipal Opera House, where he and Cottard attended a performance of Gluck's *Orpheus*. People have still been seeking out lavish pleasures and distractions, so the opera is still popular even though it keeps playing the same show over and over. In the third act of the play, just as Eurydice is being taken back to Hades, the actor playing Orpheus collapses on the stage, succumbing to the plague. The audience immediately exits the opera house, calmly at first but soon devolving into a stampede.

The public continues to try and distract themselves with entertainment, and Orpheus *is especially symbolic because it is about two lovers separated by death who are almost, but not quite, reunited – a fantasy that speaks directly to the longings of the townspeople. The collapse of the actor then destroys the illusion – there can be no escape from plague, and no reunion with dead loved ones – and the audience reacts with panic.*

Rambert meets with Marcel and Louis again, and he moves in with them and their mother, a little old Spanish woman. They agree that he will escape at midnight the next night. The next day Rambert finds Dr. Rieux in the middle of his work and tells him that he has decided to stay in Oran, and give up his happiness to keep fighting the plague. Rambert confesses that if even he did escape, he would feel like a coward. Rieux is pleased at this, but he is too weary to deal with the philosophical implications of turning one's back on love – he says "a man can't cure and know at the same time," but curing is the more important job.

Rambert finally comprehends the nature of the plague and accepts that it is his responsibility to fight it alongside Rieux. Rambert and Rieux are in similar situations, but Rieux seeks fulfillment and happiness in something beyond the human individual, while Rambert looks no further than human love. Again Rieux is willing to dispense with everything unnecessary – even a philosophy to justify his work – that might get in the way of fighting the plague.

Dr. Castel finishes his anti-plague serum, and he and Dr. Rieux are present to give the first injection to M. Othon's small son, Jacques, whose case is almost hopeless. M. Othon is forced to leave for a quarantine camp, but he accepts the rule of the rest of the public. Father Paneloux (who has joined the sanitation league) joins the vigil and he, Rieux, Castel, Grand, and Tarrou watch to see if the serum has any effect on Jacques.

This begins the longest description of a plague victim's suffering in the novel, and makes the true horror of the epidemic more graphic and intimate than simply a high death toll. Camus has Paneloux witness this ultimate injustice – the suffering of an innocent child – so that his abstract idea of the plague as collective punishment can be broken.

Jacques suffers terribly before dying, the fever abating and then returning three times, and he finally expires "in a grotesque parody of crucifixion" as the men watch in horror. Paneloux cries out to God to save the child, but in vain. As he leaves the room, Rieux lashes out angrily at Paneloux, saying that the child was innocent.

Jacques becomes a kind of Christ-figure in the language Camus uses (crucifixion, the fever striking three times like Peter denying Jesus), but his death is entirely meaningless and random. Jacques' suffering and death is the ultimate representation of the plague and the cruel, absurd universe.

Outside the hospital Paneloux talks to Dr. Rieux, who apologizes for his outburst. Paneloux understands that Rieux's anger is directed at his sermon and the idea of divine punishment, but Paneloux still clings to faith in a system he professes to no longer understand. Rieux vows to never support a system where "children are put to torture." He says he is not concerned with man's salvation, but only his health. He declares that he and Paneloux are still allies as long as they are both fighting plague, and the two men part ways.

Camus implies here that to try and justify the death of a child is to be cowardly and untruthful. Paneloux's faith is clearly shaken by this experience, but he chooses to maintain his "leap of faith" even in the face of evidence. Rieux accepts Paneloux as an ally against the plague, but he will not accept the priest's justification of needless suffering.

After watching the child's death, a change seems to come over Father Paneloux in the following days. He begins working on an essay about whether a priest should consult a doctor, and he invites Dr. Rieux to come hear him preach another sermon about the plague. Since the epidemic has worsened, the public has turned from religion to superstition and vague prophecies, so the church is much emptier than the last time Paneloux preached.

At first people were eager to rationalize the plague, so they wanted to hear Paneloux's religious justification for the epidemic, but at this point they have seen the true nature of plague – its random, meaningless suffering – and so many have given up religion.

In his sermon, Father Paneloux declares that the extreme and seemingly meaningless suffering of the plague only makes his first sermon more relevant. The unknowable question of an innocent child's death, which they must now face, is a test to the Christian's faith. He is forced to deny everything or accept everything – there can be no middle ground anymore, and perhaps not even any purgatory. Paneloux presents this dichotomy and asks only who would "dare to deny everything?"

Paneloux basically asks his congregation to make a leap of faith in the face of evidence – to become purposefully ignorant to the suffering of children and put all their faith in God. Camus saw this kind of sacrifice of ego and rationality as a cowardly surrender. He preferred to struggle on alone against death and the Absurd state of the universe.

Father Paneloux references a story of a previous epidemic in which only four monks of a monastery survived, and three of them fled. Paneloux declares that each of his congregation "must be the one who stays." They must not give in to the plague without a struggle, but they also must trust in God and do what good is in their power to do. Paneloux ends by again emphasizing the difficulty of faith, but that in such times one must choose to either love God or hate him.

Paneloux's sermon is a variation on Rieux's approach to the plague, as the doctor also sees things in an "all or nothing way," in which the decent thing to do is to fight the epidemic, and anything else is selfish cowardice – but Paneloux takes the opposite view, advocating that his listeners put their lives in God's hands.

Afterward Rieux and Tarrou discuss the sermon, and they overhear a priest and deacon talking about Paneloux's new essay, which apparently states that it is illogical for a priest to call a doctor. Tarrou agrees, saying that in the face of a dying child a Christian must either lose his religion or "consent to having his eyes destroyed," and Paneloux will keep clinging to his faith to the very end.

Tarrou states the harsher views of Camus' philosophy – a different type of "all or nothing" approach – that if a Christian accepts that everything is the will of the God, then the Christian must submit without complaint to whatever horrors the universe throws at them.

Soon afterward Father Paneloux grows sick, but he sticks to his principles and refuses to call a doctor. The woman he is staying with calls Rieux nonetheless, as she fears Paneloux has the plague. Rieux examines him and Paneloux does not have the usual symptoms of the plague, but his condition quickly declines and he dies. Rieux marks him as a "Doubtful case."

It is implied that Paneloux's crumbling belief ultimately kills him, as he desperately throws everything into his faith and refuses even a doctor's help. He passively accepts death, which is something Camus argues against in the novel. The "doubtful case" is ironic because of Paneloux's new doubt in God, and his doubtful understanding of the human condition.

All Souls' Day, where the dead are usually honored, passes and is ignored this year, as death is already all too present in the public's mind. Meanwhile the death toll stops increasing, but still remains at "high-water mark," and Dr. Richard succumbs to the plague just before he is supposed to make an optimistic statement to the public. All public places and buildings have been turned into quarantine camps by now, and the anti-plague workers mechanically maintain their "superhuman" efforts.

Dr. Richard and the authorities are still looking to spin the plague in an optimistic way rather than actually admit it is a catastrophe and do something about it. This is why it is so ironic that Dr. Richard dies just before he is about to say something encouraging about the death toll remaining steady – the plague has no concern for optimism or politics.

The food supply of Oran also begins to dwindle, and the divide between rich and poor grows as the rich buy up extra supplies and the rest are left hungry. Under pressure from the authorities the newspapers remain optimistic, praising the "courage and composure" of the public.

The newspapers too try and make a dramatic narrative out of the epidemic, praising "heroes" in the way that Rieux refuses to do. The selfishness and class differences return to the populace even in the face of death, the great equalizer.

Tarrou records his visit to a quarantine camp with Rambert and Gonzales, Rambert's football-loving friend. The camp is a requisitioned football stadium, and the people living in tents inside spend their days marking time listlessly and rarely speaking, well aware that they have been forgotten. M. Othon (who is quarantined now) approaches the men and asks them about Jacques' death, and Tarrou falsely says that Jacques did not suffer.

The quarantine camps are even smaller microcosms of the prison of Oran, as the people there feel more intensely the sensations of being both exiled and trapped. M. Othon seems softened by plague, and even the relentlessly truthful Tarrou takes pity on him and lies about Jacques' horrible death.

November ends and the weather grows colder. Tarrou and Rieux visit the doctor's asthma patient, and after listening to his chatter for a while they go up onto the terrace of his building, which offers a wide view of the sea and the night sky. The clear expanse feels like a momentary respite from plague. Tarrou and Rieux affirm that they are friends now, and Tarrou offers that they "take an hour off – for friendship."

The sea is often a positive symbol in Camus' writing, and here it is a place of escape for Rieux and Tarrou. As in most of the novel's relationships, the two men struggle to communicate. They then take a break from fighting the plague to try and achieve some true communion.

Tarrou explains that he has "had plague already," and describes his childhood. His father was a high-ranking prosecuting attorney, who had an obsession with memorizing train schedules. When Tarrou was seventeen, his father invited him to see him speak in court. The experience was traumatic for Tarrou, who was struck by the helpless humanity of the defendant (whom he compares to an owl) and his father's ominous red robes as he condemned the man to death.

Camus also fought against the death penalty all his life, so Tarrou's story has biographical overtones. In this philosophical conversation Rieux and Tarrou muse on the more universal meanings of "plague," as Tarrou relates his guilt over taking part in a murderous system to the current epidemic.

Soon afterward Tarrou ran away from home and broke off contact with his father. He became preoccupied with the death penalty, and felt that all society was based on murder. Tarrou then became an "agitator," fighting against executions in many European countries. He still cannot rid himself of his guilt, however, that even indirectly he has caused the deaths of others.

This is similar to Camus' background, as the author also fought for human rights in several countries. Camus tried to put his philosophy into practice by struggling against human suffering at all times. Tarrou and Rieux have similar philosophies, but they arrived at them in very different ways.

Tarrou says that this is why the plague is nothing new to him – he has always been struggling against the plague inside himself, but he continues to struggle on, as it is the only thing to be done. He sees the world as made up of pestilences, victims, and true healers, and he tries his best not to be a pestilence, and seeks attain the third category, which he associates with peace. Tarrou pauses for a while and then tells Rieux that what most interests him is how to become a saint without God. Rieux says that he is not interested in sainthood, but only in "being a man."

This is one of the theses of the novel: humans are always suffering from some kind of plague (as the Absurd is everywhere), and so they can aid the plague, despair and succumb to it, or try to struggle against it. Both Rieux and Tarrou are more ambitious than Rambert, as they look for happiness and peace in an impossible place – trying to achieve sainthood without a God.

Tarrou then suggests that they take a swim in the ocean "for friendship's sake," as they have passes that will allow them onto the pier. Rieux agrees, and they swim silently out into the starlit ocean, feeling a rare moment of joy and peace as they are swept up by the vastness of the sky and sea. Then they get dressed and return to the town, ready to struggle on again.

The ocean is an incarnation of the Absurd that is not malevolent (here at least) like the plague, and so it provides a healing respite for the two men. They can lose themselves in something large and unconcerned with them, but something peaceful and beautiful instead of brutal and deadly.

In December M. Othon's period of quarantine ends, but he elects to go back to his camp as a volunteer for the anti-plague squad, as it would help him feel "less separated" from Jacques. Rieux is amazed to see a sudden gentleness appear in the severe man's eyes.

M. Othon, whom Tarrou had viewed as an enemy because he was a judge (and sentenced people to die) has also been softened by plague, and has a greater understanding of the common human condition now.

Christmas approaches, and Rieux tries to write a letter to his wife but struggles greatly with his words. The season reminds Grand of his courtship with Jeanne – which took place at Christmas – and he grows depressed and sentimental. Rieux notices that he is especially upset one day, and he discovers that Grand has a fever. He comes down with the plague and stays bedridden in his own room.

Rieux again struggles to convey the truth of his experience through language, and mostly fails. He and his wife are basically unable to communicate, as she falsely pretends her health is getting better and he cannot explain his daily life fighting the plague.

As his condition declines, Grand asks Dr. Rieux to read through his papers. Most of them are variations of the first sentence of his book, but there is one unfinished letter to Jeanne, containing only eight words. Grand asks Rieux to burn the papers, and he does so. The next day Grand makes a miraculous recovery and his fever disappears.

Rieux is proven wrong – the plague does strike odd, harmless people like Grand – but Grand miraculously recovers, marking the beginning of the end for the epidemic. In his brush with death Grand seems to achieve some peace with his struggle to express himself.

Rieux then has another patient whose case seems hopeless but makes a similar recovery. Rieux visits his asthma patient, who excitedly declares that the **rats** have come back. When the death toll figures are announced that week, the numbers have gone down.

The rats again become symbols of the people of Oran, as their return foreshadows the exit of the epidemic. There is finally a little hope, though the plague's retreat is just as absurd and meaningless as its appearance.

PART 5

The plague seems on the retreat, but people are hesitant to allow themselves to hope, as they have become so weary and cautious in their isolation. Dr. Castel's serum becomes more effective, and there are more cases of recovery. M. Othon dies just as hope begins to blossom. The retreat of the plague is just as mysterious as its arrival – the doctors' treatments have not changed, but they suddenly grow effective.

Again Camus undercuts any feeling of heroism or victory in the retreat of the plague. It is the disease itself randomly disappearing, not the heroic humans defeating it through their medicine or struggle. This story is not about the human spirit overcoming the Absurd, but simply about the struggle against it.

Change is slow to come to the populace, but optimism slowly increases. The Prefect announces that the town gates will open in two weeks, but the sanitation restrictions will remain for another month. The night of the announcement there is much celebrating, except among the houses still grieving lost loved ones, who feel exiled by the joy of others. Rieux and his friends join the festivities, and Tarrou sees a cat run across the road – the first cat seen since spring.

The Prefect as usual is concerned with making optimistic statements and spinning the epidemic into a positive story. The celebration of Oran is well-deserved, but it will soon become a means of forgetting the plague and pretending that nothing has changed.

Tarrou still takes a few scattered notes in his diary – he records that the **man who spits on cats** does not appear again even when the cats return, and Tarrou wonders if he is dead, and whether he was a saint. Tarrou writes more about Rieux's mother and her gentle kindness, and how she reminds Tarrou of his own mother.

The man who spits on cats remains a mystery, but as a small symbol of the human condition Tarrou cannot help wondering if he succumbed to the plague, gave up on his cat-spitting pastime, or moved on to something new.

Cottard is the only person upset by the retreat of the plague. He fears that as soon as the town gates are opened he will be arrested, and he suffers from extreme mood swings and paranoia. One day Tarrou is walking Cottard home, musing on making a "fresh start" after the plague, when two men who look like government employees emerge and ask for Cottard. Cottard flees and the men follow him unhurriedly.

Everyone else is feeling optimistic and has a new lease on life, but Cottard is distressed at being left alone in his paranoia once more. Oran is about to be freed from its exile and imprisonment, but Cottard's is just beginning again.

Dr. Rieux's days are no less busy than before, but he has a new hopefulness that makes him feel less weary. Then Tarrou comes down with the plague, and Rieux and his mother care for him instead of sending him off to the hospital. Tarrou promises to fight as hard as he can for life, but he asks Rieux to be totally truthful about his condition.

Tarrou's final struggle against the plague is the culmination of his philosophy and the climax of the novel. His disease is a foil to Paneloux's, as Tarrou vows to struggle for his life instead of passively submitting to the plague.

Tarrou struggles silently against the disease (which is strangely of both pneumonic and bubonic varieties) for several long, painful days as Rieux and his mother tend to him. Finally Tarrou rolls over to face the wall and dies, and Rieux cries "tears of impotence." That night Rieux and his mother sit in silence, and Rieux wonders if Tarrou found peace in the end. Suddenly he feels a surge of affection for his mother, and he realizes how strongly they love each other, though they never speak of it.

Tarrou suffers both kinds of plague at once, as his struggle becomes the symbol of humanity fighting for life against all forms of suffering and death. Tarrou seems to achieve some of the peace he sought, but only in this last battle with death. Rieux cannot hold off sentiment this time, as the true cruelty of the Absurd strikes him close to his heart. The love between Dr. Rieux and his mother is no less powerful because it cannot be put into words.

The next morning Dr. Rieux gets a telegram reporting that his wife has died. He takes it with composure, as the grief is the same kind of suffering he is now accustomed to, especially in the last two days.

Everything strikes Dr. Rieux at once, but he has moved beyond selfish suffering and can grieve for his wife in the same way that he grieved for all of Oran.

The gates of Oran finally open in February, and packed trains enter the city, where many separated loved ones are reunited. Rambert's wife is among them, and Rambert realizes how much he has changed because of the plague. He is still hopeful for their reunion, but it is no longer the single passion of his life. His wife arrives and they embrace, and Rambert tries to pretend that the plague has left no scars on his happiness.

Rambert also has been changed by the plague so that he is not so preoccupied with his own suffering and love. He and his wife have a happy reunion, but it is left unexplained how their relationship will be affected by the plague. This begins the phase when the townspeople will try to forget about plague and return to their habits.

Most of the reunited citizens return to their homes and begin to act like everything is the same as before. But some travelers get off the trains to find no one waiting for them, and for these their grief is just beginning. Otherwise the streets are filled with celebration, and the happy lovers once again have their "proud egoism," purposefully forgetting that they live in a world where humans "were killed off like flies."

Just as they could ignore the rats or the epidemic, the townspeople show the amazing human capacity to deny the Absurd. As soon as the plague leaves they try to pretend they live in a world where plague (or war) could not randomly strike, which only ensures that they will be just as surprised by the next disaster.

Rieux walks through the streets and thinks about all the isolated, exiled people who are now safely together. He thinks about Tarrou, and muses that Tarrou was separated from something he could not define, which was perhaps peace. He thinks about those like Rambert, whose hope lies in human love, and how these people are the only ones who can achieve happiness. Others like Rieux and Tarrou, who hope for something beyond humanity, have not found their answer.

Rieux recognizes his own experiences in the plague, and wonders if there is a way to achieve the peace Tarrou found without waiting for death or hoping only in the human individual. Rieux sought the impossible, to defeat plague by his own struggle, and though he has achieved a temporary victory it brings him little peace.

Dr. Rieux reveals himself as the narrator of the chronicle, and explains that he chose the role of impartial observer to try and make his account more objective. As a doctor, he was a firsthand observer of the plague among the individuals of Oran. He tried to comment on the only certain things people have in common – love, exile, and suffering, all of with Rieux himself took part in – rather than speculating further.

This final reveal of the narrator reminds us of Rieux's attempt at achieving objectivity and truth in his story. But by the end he admits that the only thing people have in common are love, exile, and suffering, and these are the only things he was able to truly describe.

Dr. Rieux feels he must end with Cottard, the only man he cannot understand, but whose only real crime was approving of something that killed people and having an ignorant, lonely heart. Rieux chronicles himself as he goes to visit Grand and Cottard, but finds a police cordon blocking off the street. Grand approaches at the same time, also confused about the situation.

Cottard's past crime is never explained, and neither Rieux nor Grand seem particularly interested in it. They are most concerned with his present state of "plague," and the ignorance of the human condition and common human bonds that led to his support of the epidemic.

A policeman explains that Cottard has shut himself in his apartment with a gun, and he has been yelling and firing indiscriminately at people in the street. A dog appears and Cottard shoots at it. Then more police arrive with a machine gun, and they take the screaming Cottard into custody.

Cottard finally is driven mad by his paranoia and inability to connect with other people. His final acts – firing a gun at strangers – shows how separated he truly is, as he cannot perceive that he is the same as those people he uses as targets for his frustration.

Shaken by this incident, Rieux and Grand part ways, and Grand explains that he has written Jeanne a letter and is feeling much happier. He has also resumed work on his sentence, but has "cut out all the adjectives."

Grand, the "hero," has found a kind of peace after overcoming plague. He has new hope about the possibility of communication, though cutting the adjectives suggests the experience of the plague has made his ideal language more spare.

Rieux visits his asthma patient that night, who is transferring peas from one pot to another as usual. The old man comments on Tarrou's death, saying that the best always die. He also remarks on the pride the townspeople seem to take in having survived the plague. They will put up a monument to the dead, deliver some speeches, and then return to their normal routine. The asthma patient says the plague is just life, and nothing more.

The asthma patient here points out the absurdity of the populace (instead of echoing it, as he usually does) in trying to forget the plague, when in reality life is filled with all kinds of plagues. The universe itself is a plague of sorts that ends in death, so to try and deny it is an act of ignorance or cowardice.

Rieux goes up onto the terrace where Tarrou had told his life story. Rieux listens to the public rejoicing and is inclined to agree with his asthma patient – the people have not changed because of the plague. Because of this, Rieux decides to bear witness to the plague victims by writing this chronicle. He also intends it to show that there is more to praise in humans than to despise.

Rieux chooses to draw an optimistic view from his chronicle, but he has painted a very bleak picture of the universe and humanity. He tries to keep his chronicle "objective" to simply memorialize the victims and healers of the epidemic, rather than romanticizing the "heroism" of the human spirit or declare that the plague is gone forever.

Even so, Rieux knows that he is not recording a "final victory" by any means, as the bacillus microbe can lie dormant for many years in the most innocent, commonplace objects before rising up to strike down a city once more. Instead the chronicle is only a record of what "had to be done," and of of those who struggled against the plague and tried to be healers.

Though Rieux and Oran have achieved a respite from plague, the doctor has learned that all the inevitable suffering and death of life is a kind of plague, and that even if this particular disease does not return, there will always be something else that people must be vigilant against and struggle with.

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