

Coronavirus as Seen Through the Lens of Camus's *The Plague*

By Lipika Narisetti

Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* provides a fictional narrative of a plague outbreak in Oran, detailing the chillingly rapid progression of the disease as it ravages the city. The initially bewildering but benign phenomenon involving the deaths of rats throughout Oran rapidly shifts to a full-fledged epidemic, causing the residents of the city to be abruptly isolated from their loved ones and the rest of society. *The Plague* closely resembles the quarantine period imposed upon most of the world due to the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the continued social distancing guidelines and other safety measures that involve isolating from others as much as possible. The effects of the plague experienced by the residents of Oran are eerily similar to those of the coronavirus, with strong parallels in the progressions of both outbreaks and the psychological, social, and emotional effects they have on those living through them.

The course of the plague as it sweeps Oran, as well as the attitudes of the townspeople toward it, call to mind the rapid progression of the coronavirus pandemic at its onset. The plague has a seemingly innocuous beginning, as the narrator relates the observations of Dr. Bernard Rieux, a physician in Oran, who notices several dead rats in the city. This number slowly increases over the course of the next few weeks, until it

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becomes the only topic of conversation among the townspeople. Soon, a strange disease begins to affect some of them. It starts with only a few but steadily increases as the weeks pass, following the pattern observed in the rat deaths (Camus 22). The newspapers, however, fail to mention these deaths, in stark contrast to their initial eagerness to chronicle those of the rats. The government also works to quell fears, erroneously informing the public that “the phenomenon had abruptly ended and the sanitary service had collected only a trifling number of rats” (Camus 17). The implicit attitude of most in the city is one of intentional denial, feigned as casual nonchalance. Despite knowing that something is amiss, the residents choose the path of ignorance in hopes that the strange occurrence will disappear rather than become more severe. The detachment with which they regard the disease reflects that of many of us at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic: inconsistent statistics of low mortality rates deflected from the threat of the disease, causing it to be dismissed as unworthy of great concern or a disruption of normal patterns. Eventually though, in both cases, the diseases proved prevalent convictions wrong, and were met with a strict response of indefinite quarantine wholly unpredicted by the public.

Standing in immediate contrast to the attitude of the public to the disease is the response of the doctors in Oran, who react to the outbreak with great concern. The juxtaposition between the behavior of the doctors and the rest of the city serves as a standpoint from which to evaluate the coronavirus pandemic as well. The narrator of *The Plague* explains the difficulty Dr. Rieux has in convincing the government to quarantine Oran, describing one meeting in which Rieux explicitly states his suspicion that the mysterious disease is the plague. The response to his concern is the establishment of several sanitation measures, which Rieux observes are “far

from Draconian and ... had the feeling that many concessions had been made to a desire not to alarm the public" (Camus 51). The tension in the novel between the government and doctors in establishing safety measures rigorous enough to protect the public while avoiding panic parallels the implementation of COVID-19 health measures such as wearing a mask in public and banning large gatherings. Today, Dr. Fauci can be seen as a counterpart to Dr. Rieux in the coronavirus pandemic, his safety recommendations occasionally putting him at odds with the current government. The thread running through *The Plague* and real life is the question of authority during a pandemic, and to what extent should that authority have control over decisions that are outside its dominion.

Throughout *The Plague*, the disease is explored from a religious and philosophical standpoint, questioning why the outbreak affected Oran specifically, and whether it has any meaning. Father Paneloux, Oran's preacher, admonishes the townspeople that the plague is a punishment sent by God, in order for them to, "learn [their] lesson, the lesson that was learned by ... all that hardened their hearts against Him" (Camus 97). Debanjan Banerjee, et al., provide an alternate explanation in their article "Revisiting 'The Plague' by Camus: Shaping the 'social absurdity' of the COVID-19 Pandemic." The authors posit that as Camus's characters are confronted with random death, they face a sudden existentialist perspective they never before considered: "This intense 'fear of end' while knowing the very obvious has been the basis of human absurdity during the time of pandemics. Existentialism further proposes this absurdity rises out of the conflict between constant search for meaning in life versus the apparent 'nothingness' of the universe" (Banerjee et al.). The narrator of *The Plague* echoes the idea that the only refuge from absurdism is logic, no matter how tenuous it may be, observing that

people have an innate sense of rationality and justice that resists the idea of random actions. A plague that indiscriminately chooses its victims contradicts the very nature of such beliefs in reason, making it difficult to accept until there is no other choice. Even Dr. Rieux, who serves as a stable voice of reason, going so far as to demand Oran's quarantine, has trouble understanding how the plague could possibly affect his city. He lulls himself into a false sense of reassurance, a moment which the narrator records, "He simply couldn't believe that a pestilence on the great scale could befall a town where people like Grand were to be found... He concluded that the chances were all against the plague's making any headway among our fellow citizens" (Camus 46-47). In the same way that Rieux and the rest of Oran do not believe the plague could ever affect them, many citizens in the United States did not think the coronavirus would become a pandemic in such a developed country. After it arrived in the country and wreaked widespread havoc, many turned to comfort in the form of religion in order to ascribe their fate to a higher authority, while others searched for concrete answers in science. Regardless of the mode, the active search for a basis from which to explain the cause of the outbreaks reflects the struggle of both the residents of Oran as well as those living through the coronavirus pandemic to find a balance between hope and despair, meaningfulness and absurdism.

As the plague continues in Oran, asserting its undeniable presence, the behavior of the residents shifts yet again, from denial, to seeking rationality, to embracing the absurdism that they face. Finally accepting the reality of the plague, the townspeople fall into a temporary state of widespread melancholy and purposelessness. Their sudden solitude plunges them all into intense emotional isolation, as they brood on the relationships they've lost. Despite the shared nature of

their suffering, the townspeople refuse to speak to one another about their individual pain, unwilling to consider the prospect that it may not, in fact, be unique to them (Camus 78). Yet, once again, the townspeople return to their lives as much as they can, choosing to live a vague abstraction of the past even as everything else has changed. The narrator summarizes the goal of their behavior: “In short, they kept up appearances” (Camus 79). At the same time, the authorities, including Rieux, find themselves hardening to the effects of the plague and shutting out the pity they previously felt for plague victims or those trapped in the city by unlucky circumstances. Rieux realizes this, musing that “An element of abstraction, of a divorce from reality, entered into such calamities” (Camus 88). Similarly, the attitude towards the coronavirus progressed from initial impatience to fear and vigilance that over time faded into a languid state of exhaustion pervading the country’s psyche. In response to this feeling, some chose to test death by refusing to wear a mask and purposefully seeking out large groups of people to spend time with. These people, like the ones in the novel who flock to restaurants even when they should be isolating from one another, reflect the subconscious wish that if they contract the disease, the unknown, they will fear it less.

The parallels between the plague in Oran and the coronavirus pandemic reflect the universality of the human response to widespread disease. In the conclusion of *The Plague*, the narrator of the tale reveals his identity as Dr. Rieux. His goal in sharing the story of the plague, as objectively as possible yet “deliberately taking the victims’ side” (Camus 301), was to bear witness to the unimaginable pain and suffering and yet also, to the best parts of human nature that emerged during the outbreak. Most importantly though, Rieux’s story is a cautionary account. Even when the plague is eliminated from Oran, he cannot rejoice like the other townspeople. He states

that “the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory...such joy is always imperiled” (Camus 308). In his narrative, Rieux foreshadows the darkness of the future, in which lurks an inevitable recurrence of disease when least expected. As we experience the coronavirus pandemic, Rieux’s message of the unpredictability of life and the danger of complacency resonate deeply. Overall, through *The Plague*, Camus raises the question of how the meaning of life is found and if it can only truly be sought in a situation where life itself is put in jeopardy, forcing people to reveal their true natures to themselves and those around them.

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