

## ***The Plague's* Diverse Templates for Patients and Clinicians**

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"Of all Camus' novels, none described man's confrontation and cohabitation with death so vividly and on such an epic scale as [...] *The Plague*" (Vulliamy). This recent commentary on Camus's celebrated work reminds us of the significance of *The Plague* in the context of the author's lifelong preoccupation with human mortality, a preoccupation at the center of his thinking on the Absurd and triggered, of course, by the young Albert's contraction of tuberculosis which would bring the prospect of his own death into sharp relief for the remainder of his life. Yet as well as representing, to borrow the phraseology of Susan Sontag, "a metaphor for the dismal and the disastrous" (86), and despite Camus's own reservations on his project ("Carnets 1942-1951" 89), *The Plague* also champions human resilience and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. In so doing, the work invites us to reassess our attitudes towards dealing with suffering and distress in a variety of contexts in accordance with the epigraph to the chronicle, taken from the Preface to the third volume of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719): "It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not!" (3). This citation points up the universal symbolism of the plague and, over the years, commentators have taken this as their cue to interpret Camus's work from many different perspectives: as a representation of the "metaphysical" injustice at the core of his philosophy of the Absurd; as a historical account of Camus's own experience in the French Resistance; as a fight against the tyranny of totalitarianism; and as a means by which to champion the ethic of human solidarity (Lévi-Valensi 175-205). Camus himself highlights the multi-faceted nature of the plague in an early comment on his projected work recorded in his personal notebook:

"I want to express by means of the plague the suffocation from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. At the same time, I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general" ("Carnets: 1942-1951" 35).

Critics of what the French essayist Gaëtan Picon calls Camus's "allegorical novel" (146) have identified the shortcomings of such universal symbolism (Foley 50-54; Gray; Thody 48-55). Philip Thody pointedly summarizes these critical stances when he comments that "[t]here is all the difference in the world between trying to stop the spread of an impersonal disease for which nobody is responsible and which has no identifiable aims, and trying to kill Germans" (58). Be that as it may, in this chapter, I propose to analyze Camus's depiction of the plague from the perspectives of patients and clinicians and thereby examine how the lessons learned by this depiction, and by the characters' responses to the pestilence, can provide a template for those coping with illness in the context of contemporary health practices. Indeed, modern diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola, with their emotional scars and social stigmas, bring the pertinence of *The Plague* strongly to the fore; an examination of Camus's work can help to inform our responses to such contemporary conditions.

In her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1991), Susan Sontag argues that the recourse to rhetoric, when faced with the acute reality of disease, is demeaning to patients. Drawing parallels between the "White Plague" of tuberculosis and the "modern" diseases of cancer and AIDS, Sontag highlights how a process of mystification of illness - "the night-side of life" (3) - is used to conceal the stigma of such conditions, thereby rendering patients victims not only of the disease itself but also of society's attempt to subvert its psychological impact. "[M]etaphors and myths kill", Sontag contends (99). Examining what she calls "the Romantic cult of the disease" (35), Sontag argues how, historically, euphemistic language has tended to obviate the tubercular's physical suffering and, indeed, has rendered the victim of the illness strangely distinctive: "Sickness was a way of making people 'interesting' -

which is how 'romantic' was originally defined" (31). Sufferers are driven into a conspiracy of silence, ashamed of and disgraced by the "psychological event" of their affliction (58) which is seen as a force of "evil" leading to a "diminution of the self" (98) and something to hide from the outside world. The patient thus becomes drawn into a state of alienation, where illness prevents authentic communication: "Contact with someone afflicted with a disease regarded as a mysterious malevolency inevitably feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo" (6). Sontag's solution to this predicament is to "de-mythicize" disease (7), so that lucidity replaces abstraction in the patient's experience of illness. Subverting the fear of disease by confronting it directly is, in Sontag's view, the best way of dealing with the affliction: "illness is *not* a metaphor, and [...] the most truthful way of regarding illness and the healthiest way of being ill is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking" (3; emphasis in the original).

Although Sontag's pioneering work is seen by many commentators to be pivotal to the discourse of disease, with clear resonances in *The Plague*, other critics have tested her assumptions about disease metaphors. Historian Allan Brandt, for instance, observes that "Sontag's ultimate mission - to free disease of its metaphors - appears in retrospect naïve, if not misguided" (203-04). Barbara Clow, for her part, deems Sontag's conclusions on the power of metaphor to shape illness experience to be "clearly overdrawn" (311). Based on a scrutiny of historical attitudes and experiences of illness as documented in patient correspondence and written sources such as obituaries and medical literature, Clow contends that "[r]ituals and euphemisms did not necessarily render sufferers mute or helpless: in many cases, they helped patients, families, friends, and physicians to cope with a devastating disease" (311). Clearly, managing illness is not only physically demanding, but also a psychological challenge which can influence the victim's attitude towards the suffering and distress which an affliction affords. There is a body of work which focusses on the psychology of illness. To cite but a few sources here, Rogers and Pilgrim, supported by Weiss and Lonquist, usefully examine the intersections

between the sociology and psychiatry of illness, while Greco offers a critical insight into the psychosomatic dimensions of disease. There are clear implications here for public health workers who are confronted with the reality of illness and disease, as well as for the patients who suffer from these conditions. As I intend to demonstrate in what follows, Camus's *The Plague* provides a number of templates for those dealing with disease on a day-to-day basis.

Writing in his private notebook in November 1942, Camus observes that "[i]llness is a convent which has its Rule, its fasts, its silences and its inspirations" ("Carnets: 1942-1951" 26). This "pedagogic" configuration of disease is in evidence in the case of Camus's own medical condition: according to biographer Herbert Lottman, he would later disclose to both Jean Bloch-Michel and Max-Pol Fouchet his belief that tuberculosis was a "metaphysical" illness, inasmuch as "[y]ou can cure yourself if you want to" (46, 685 note 18). Furthermore, in private correspondence with fellow tubercular Guy Dumur dated 3 January 1944, Camus points up the lessons learned through his own experience of the disease:

"I am not cured because I was not courageous at the start and because I cut corners everywhere I could. Today, I have to make a far greater effort, every day, to keep my distance and to make useful a body which, otherwise, would enslave me entirely" ("Essais" 1668-69; my translation).

It is curious that, rather than a personal sense of injustice towards the state of his health which we might expect given the serious nature of the disease - tuberculosis posed a severe threat to human life at the time - Camus experiences here a sense of regret, tempered with a lack of will, in not - in its early manifestations at least - having had the courage to take his illness seriously. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Orme), far from perceiving his disease in terms of a personal injustice, Camus confronts his condition with stubborn optimism, a claim borne out by the remarks he made on his condition in the retrospective preface to *Betwixt and Between* in 1958:

"When a serious illness temporarily deprived me of that natural vigour which for me transfigured everything, in spite of the invisible infirmities and new weaknesses which this illness brought me, I knew fear and discouragement but never bitterness. This illness certainly did add new fetters, and these were the hardest to bear, to those which were already mine. But in the last resort, it encouraged that freedom of the heart, that slight detachment from human concerns, which has always saved me from resentment" ("Selected Essays and Notebooks" 20-21).

The idea that lessons can be learned from the experience of illness is apparent in *The Plague*. In the closing remarks to his chronicle, Rieux observes that "for the bane and the *enlightening* of men" (252; my emphasis), future pestilences cannot (and should not) be ruled out. However, the extent to which the pestilence in Camus's work can be considered beneficial is a moot point. Edward Hughes perceptively observes that "[t]he impression the Narrator conveys is of the plague eradicating distinctions and so performing an almost hygienic social function" (50). For this critic, Camus's work "has [...] an analogous, educative function" (74). In an entry in his private notebook dated April 1941, Camus himself uses the title "*The liberating plague*", and he goes on to highlight the apparent ambiguity of the pestilence's status:

"Happy town. People live according to different systems. The plague: abolishes all systems. But they die all the same" ("Carnets: 1935-1942" 110).

Although plague is depicted in the work as an abstract, levelling condition to which everyone is susceptible regardless of age, gender or social status - "plague was the concern of all of us", Rieux observes (57) - those who succumb to the disease, most notably Judge Othon's child and Tarrou, point up its graphic and gratuitous nature. Yet the fact remains that many of the characters in Camus's chronicle experience the plague as a learning opportunity - sometimes positive, sometimes negative, as we shall see. Accordingly, I cannot agree with Thody when he contends that "only the journalist Rambert and the priest Paneloux give any sign of becoming different people as a result of the what happens to them" (15). Rather, Vulliamy's view appears more

convincing when he observes that "[t]he group of men gathered around the narrative represent [...] all human response to calamity". This observation has great resonance in terms of the relevance of *The Plague* to today's medical profession. The knowledge and understanding that the characters acquire as a direct result of their responses to the plague - both good and bad - can easily be transferred on to other scenarios. From individual experience thus springs a template for collective endeavor in the face of a common enemy such as disease. Or, as Camus would himself put it in his private notebook, "Plague. They all fight - and each in his own way" ("Carnets: 1942-1951" 54).

A useful starting point in examining the various responses to the pestilence in Camus's work is Rieux who, as a medical man, is by default on the side of the patient or victim. A determination to do his best for those under his care drives Rieux, and one has the impression that he is a well-respected member of the community, who is prepared to forfeit private happiness in the service of others. "The thing was to do your job as it should be done" is Rieux's guiding principle (37). At the start of the epidemic, when the word "plague" is first mooted, Rieux refuses to allow bureaucratic language to dictate his humanitarian agenda as a doctor: "It doesn't matter to me [...] how you phrase it. My point is that we should not act as if there were no likelihood that half the population wouldn't be wiped out; for then it would be" (46). As Hughes rightly observes, Rieux is a reference point in the narrative against which others can be measured: "He is an exemplar of sorts" (35). For her part, Germaine Brée writes of Rieux that "[h]e is one of two or three men who realize at once that the nature of the evil appearing in Oran is unusual and must be fought by new methods" (121). And, as James Williams observes, "Rieux has transformed his profession into a rule of life" (52). In his capacity as Camus's chronicler of the pestilence, Rieux takes on the persona of disinterested observer, in spite of his own central role in the relief effort. For Hughes, Rieux's text "betrays a feet-on-the-ground firmness" which reflects his pragmatic mind-set (38). Furthermore, there is no sense of heroism underlying how the doctor deals with

what he calls the "brutal visitation" (58) of the plague; as he later tells Tarrou: "Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me [...]. What interests me is being a man" (209). In the words of Robert de Luppé, Rieux is "a physician of bodies and not a healer of souls" (63). It is a case of the doctor merely doing his duty out of common human decency:

"The essential thing was to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation. And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical" (111).

Echoes of this selfless attitude to managing illness can be found in public health workers' responses to so-called "modern plagues" such as HIV/AIDS and Ebola. The decision to intervene in such cases as volunteers often derives from a purely humanitarian impulse to help those in distress, regardless of their own safety. One thinks here of aid workers such as Pauline Cafferkey, whose recent contribution to the relief effort against Ebola in west Africa, where more than 11,000 people died from the epidemic between 2014 and 2015, resulted in her contracting the virus herself - only to go on to make a full recovery. Just as a determination to help victims underpins Rieux's response to the plague, so a resolve to do what they can to alleviate suffering drives modern-day health practitioners such as Cafferkey. However laudable these sentiments are, one should not underestimate the impact of a given affliction on those dealing with disease on an everyday basis. This is also true of Rieux who, "[b]efore the plague [...] was welcomed as a saviour" (156) by his patients, but whose powers of resilience come to be severely tested by the relentless nature of the disease:

"Never had Rieux known his profession weigh on him so heavily. Hitherto his patients had helped to lighten his task; they gladly put themselves into his hands. For the first time the doctor felt they were keeping aloof, wrapping themselves up in their malady with a sort of bemused hostility. It was a struggle to which he wasn't yet accustomed" (53).

In his response to the disease, Rieux comes to resemble its abstract, monotonous character: depersonalizing its victims by adopting an automatic reaction to their plight is how the doctor learns to cope with the ravages of the plague, increasingly immune to medical intervention. As he records in his chronicle: "Yes, plague, like abstraction, was monotonous [...]. To fight abstraction you must have something of it in your own make-up" (76, 77). Although Rieux himself, unlike his colleague Dr Richard, ultimately survives the plague, he too is a victim of loss: "He survives the plague, but alone, dehumanized", notes Brée (122). As well as seeing many of his acquaintances succumb to the disease, his wife leaves Oran to die in a distant sanatorium. For Rieux, while these personal lessons in suffering confirm his own understanding of the plague as "[a] never-ending defeat', as he would tell Tarrou, "it's no reason for giving up the struggle" (108). This stance is confirmed at the end of *The Plague*, when Rieux highlights the ongoing nature of the therapeutic effort:

"None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers" (251-52).

Rieux's stoicism in the face of suffering (and, one might add, the doctor's mother, whose reassuring presence offers a dignified response to the chaos of the plague) provides an admirable template for medical practitioners today. It is noteworthy that, after their early resistance to Rieux's demands, his patients learn to co-operate (211): such is their faith in him. Inasmuch as he represents his fellow sufferers by choosing to write his chronicle of the plague on their behalf, Rieux remains on the side of the victim. As Gray puts it: "For all the mastery and control, the restraint and discipline of Rieux's narrative, for all the healing he *is* able to accomplish, he



nevertheless remains vulnerable, human and thus one of us: confronting circumstances that overwhelm and engulf him, but to which he refuses to succumb" (172; emphasis in the original).

If, then, Rieux represents the healthcare worker doggedly pursuing his or her work in the face of insurmountable odds, other characters in *The Plague* highlight the contradictory nature of those involved in therapeutic or relief efforts. A case in point here is Grand who, upon initial inspection, demonstrates a completely selfless attitude in his willingness to help the cause: unhesitatingly giving up his time to volunteer his services in the fight against the plague, Grand represents, in Rieux's words, "the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the sanitary groups" (112). Not expecting anything in return, Grand simply carries out what is asked of him with diligence and modesty: "Why, *that's* not difficult! Plague is here and we've got to make a stand, *that's* obvious. Ah, I only wish everything were as simple!" (112; emphasis in the original). However, on deeper examination, Grand is a much more complex character, limiting his involvement in the resistance effort in order to make time for his other work and his writing project. As such, rather than the "obscure hero" (115) who Rieux sees him to be, Grand is much more a model of the clinician or public health worker who does not give himself wholly to the relief effort because he has other commitments which he regards as being of equal, or even greater, importance. In this way, Grand symbolizes the tension between the individual and the collective, an observation which chimes with Hughes's view that, in *The Plague*, "commitment to group struggle and the pursuit of egotism actually coexist" (56). Grand is also prone to moments of self-doubt when circumstances get the better of him: falling victim to the plague (only later to recover in a first sign of the disease's waning power), Grand momentarily loses his composure and orders Rieux to burn his manuscript, the fruit of so much labor. The combination of memories of his lost love Jeanne, his frustration over his inability to express himself as he would like to - "the least word cost him a terrible effort" (42) - and his own weakened physical state results in a temporary loss of focus which manifests itself in Grand's desire to destroy his manuscript, thereby erasing

his own sense of self. In his account of this episode, Rieux is non-judgmental and completely understands Grand's motive to act in the way he does:

"He knew [...] what the old man was thinking as his tears flowed, and he, Rieux, thought it too: that a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and of devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart" (213-14).

Like Grand, Rambert displays contradictory emotions in his response to the plague which medical workers, forced to work beyond their comfort zone, will surely recognize. A journalist who is trapped in Oran because of the plague's untimely arrival, Rambert is initially an outsider in the local community, "a mere shade amongst the shadows" (92-93). However, his experience of the affliction eventually changes his mind-set: from the sometime stranger, he develops an understanding of the value of human solidarity by contributing to the team effort fighting against the plague. Rambert's realization of the value of collective endeavor recalls the role of social groups and institutions in responding to manifestations of suffering, a focal point of sociological perspectives on illness (Weitz; and Conrad and Leiter). Yet just as Grand's motivations to contribute to the relief effort are not impervious to personal commitments, so Rambert's decision to join the fight against the plague is neither absolute nor immediate. Indeed, the commitment that restrains Rambert from full involvement in the resistance group - at least for a while - is interpersonal: his desire to survive (and, if possible, escape) in order to return to his lover in France. Rambert's journey, described as "the long, heartrendingly monotonous struggle [...] to recover [his] lost happiness" (117), is actually symptomatic of the plague itself, as we have already observed in relation to Rieux's response to the epidemic. The journalist's conversations with the doctor on his plans to leave the plague-infested town betray an inner tension between, on the one hand, the desire for personal happiness and, on the other hand, the need to fulfil public duty. This dichotomy remains in evidence for those - healthcare workers among them - whose private and

public personae often come into conflict. And, as a further sign of *The Plague's* ongoing relevance to the modern medical profession, Williams has suggested that Rambert's request for a certificate from Rieux confirming that he does not have the plague can be compared with the social pressure to take a test to confirm that one is not HIV positive, still a stigma today (21). A sense of collective responsibility, learned through his work in confronting the plague, ultimately prevails for Rambert, as he would later tell Rieux:

"Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business" (170).

The plague is responsible, then, for changing Rambert's psychology from a focus on individual priorities to a focus on shared priorities. The effect of this changing attitude is confirmed when, at the end of the novel, the journalist is anxious at the prospect of being reunited with his girlfriend, once his *raison d'être*:

"For even Rambert felt a nervous tremor at the thought that soon he would have to confront a love and a devotion that the plague months had slowly refined to a pale abstraction, with the flesh-and-blood woman who had given rise to them" (240).

Although responding to the pestilence from very different perspectives, Tarrou and Father Paneloux both see their own tortuous dilemmas reflected in the plague's irrational and wanton character. For Tarrou, who "had lived a life riddled with contradictions" (237), the childhood memory of his father, as Director of Public Prosecutions, calling for the death penalty for a pathetic figure of a man described as a "poor blind 'owl' in the dock" (204) ignites a lifelong moral crusade to restore a sense of inner peace following a period as a political militant. As he explains to Rieux, "that is why I resolved to have no truck with anything which, directly or indirectly, for good reasons or for bad, brings death to anyone, or justifies others' putting him to death" (207). Such a stance motivates Tarrou to set up the voluntary sanitary groups in a bid to side-track bureaucracy, given

his belief that "[o]fficialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic" (105). (One is reminded here of the delay of the World Health Organization in declaring the recent Ebola epidemic an emergency - a delay which doubtless cost lives.) Like Rieux, Tarrou takes the side of the victim, and his ethical code is uncompromising in his conviction that "on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences" (207). However, in his pursuit of a secular form of sainthood - and here he differs from Rieux's pragmatic approach to dealing with disease - Tarrou seeks to reconcile his quest for moral absolutism with the reality of moral relativism, a quest which, as his own death starkly symbolizes, is doomed to fail because of irreconcilable differences between these two ideals. For the health worker striving to alleviate suffering in the real world, Tarrou's ambition is an admirable, yet ultimately unachievable, objective. The idea that Tarrou, by the time of his demise, was himself moving towards this realization is implied by a late note in his diary: "Perhaps [...] we can only reach approximations of sainthood. In which case we must make shift with a mild, benevolent diabolism" (224).

Paneloux, too, is a character confronted with contradictions. As a priest forced to respond to the effects of the plague, he finds himself caught on the horns of a dilemma, seeking to reconcile the suffering and distress caused by the pestilence with his own religious convictions. This dilemma reflects the classical philosophical conundrum between medical intervention and divine authority - a tussle which engulfs Paneloux, who confides to Rieux that he is working on a pamphlet entitled "*Is a Priest Justified in Consulting a Doctor?*" (180). The opening gambit of Paneloux's first sermon to the townspeople of Oran - "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (80) - is uncompromisingly accusatory in tone, a stance which is couched in imagery of divine retribution. As Sontag recalls, such attitudes are endemic in historical interpretations of pestilence:

"It is usually epidemics that are thought of as plagues. And these mass incidences of illness are understood as inflicted, not just endured. Considering illness as a punishment is the oldest idea of what causes illness, and an idea opposed by all attention to the ill that deserves the noble name of medicine. [...] Diseases, insofar as they acquired meaning, were collective calamities, and judgments on a community (131).<sup>1</sup>

It hardly needs mentioning that the onset of modern diseases such as AIDS (deemed "the gay plague" following its discovery in the early 1980s (Long)), falls under the category of "judgments on a community", judgments which lead to stigmatized victims in accordance with Sontag's views on illness to which reference was made earlier. However, as Thody observes, plague "is not an illness which human beings either cause or make worse by their own unwise or immoral conduct" (47). This begs the question of responsibility. In *The Plague*, as evidenced by the effect of Paneloux's first sermon on the people of Oran, the idea that the plague is perceived as punishment is, at best, negligible and, at worst, counter-productive:

"To some the sermon simply brought home the fact that they had been sentenced, for an unknown crime, to an indeterminate period of punishment. And while a good many people adapted themselves to confinement and carried on their humdrum lives as before, there were others who rebelled, and whose one idea now was to break loose from the prison-house" (85).

As Paneloux's subsequent moral ambivalence makes clear, the "correct" response to illness and disease is rarely one-dimensional. Intrinsic to Paneloux's process of introspection is the death of Judge Othon's son, which the priest, together with Rieux and Tarrou, all witness at first hand. (It is also worth noting in passing that Othon himself, "the owlsh paterfamilias" (97), develops a sense of humanity through his son's traumatic ordeal and joins the group of volunteers

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<sup>1</sup> For engaging accounts of plague literature, see Steel; and Leavy. As the latter critic observes, there are common denominators in this material since "despite changing conceptions of the 'self', the psychological and moral issues concerning what constitutes human beings as a group and what individuates its members serve to unify works of plague literature written over centuries and within the contexts of vastly different ideas of a human relationship to the universe" (11).

fighting the disease.) In his depiction of this event, Camus is at pains to point up the gratuitous nature of the plague's hold over an innocent child: "Tiny, half-formed, but acutely painful buboes were clogging the joints of the child's puny limbs" (173); "his body racked by convulsive tremors; it was as if his frail frame were bending before the fierce breath of the plague" (175); and "[w]hen the spasm had passed, utterly exhausted, tensing his thin legs and arms on which [...] the flesh had wasted to the bone, the child lay flat [...] in a grotesque parody of crucifixion" (175). For all his medical knowledge, Rieux's inability to alleviate such suffering leaves him helplessly isolated from the child patient with whom he strives to share an understanding, as the following passage starkly illustrates:

"Now and again Rieux took his pulse - less because this served any purpose than as an escape from his utter helplessness - and, when he closed his eyes, he seemed to feel its tumult mingling with the fever of his own blood. And then, at one with the tortured child, he struggled to sustain him with all the remaining strength of his own body. But, linked for a few moments, the rhythms of their heart-beats soon fell apart, the child escaped him, and again he knew his impotence. Then he released the small, thin wrist and moved back to his place" (176).

The frustration of the doctor unable to alleviate the suffering of the innocent comes strongly to the fore here. Rieux, "dazed with exhaustion and disgust" (177), is (temporarily) overwhelmed at seeing such distress, a revolt which mirrors our own reaction, as Gray observes (174). For Paneloux, witnessing the death of an innocent child sets in train an important process of introspection, shaking his world-view to its very foundations: "Outwardly he had lost nothing of his serenity. But, from the day on which he saw a child die, something seemed to change in him. And his face bore traces of the rising tension of his thoughts" (180). Paneloux's subsequent decision to join the sanitary squads "in the forefront of the fight" and "rubb[ing] shoulders with death" (180) gives concrete expression to his inner conflict, a state which is also in evidence in the priest's second sermon, delivered in a new spirit of inclusiveness: "He spoke in a gentler,

more thoughtful tone than on the previous occasion, and several times was noticed to be stumbling over his words. A yet more noteworthy change was that instead of saying 'You' he now said 'We' (182). There is, though, no easy resolution of Paneloux's paradox: refusing medical care when he is himself struck down by the virus - a personal response, perhaps, to the vexed question of whether a priest is justified in consulting a doctor - he desperately clings to his religious conviction as he grapples with the wider moral dilemma. (In an earlier version of the work, Paneloux was destined to lose his faith entirely (Camus, "Théâtre, récits, nouvelles" 1942)). The description of Paneloux's death as a "Doubtful case" (191) is as much a comment on his inability to resolve his own psychological turmoil as it is an acknowledgement of the cause of the priest's demise.

So far, our scrutiny of the characters' responses to the plague in Camus's work highlight the potential for interpersonal morality on which a code of ethics can be based when dealing with the suffering and distress of illness. Yet one character in *The Plague* stands apart from the general resistance effort and, as such, illustrates by contrast Camus's various templates for coping with disease. Indeed, Cottard, "an ambiguous character", as one renowned critic observes (Brée 127), and "a man with something pretty serious on his conscience", as Grand observes (50), actually profits from the plague in his black-market dealings. He is, in the words of James Williams, "the only character in the text not inspired by worthy intentions" (57). Cottard becomes "the living image of contentment" (157) and is seen to be "at ease under a reign of terror" (161), discovering a sense of self-justification in the pestilence's levelling force. As Tarrou writes of Cottard at the height of the plague, "fear seems to him more bearable under these conditions than it was when he had to bear its burden alone" (161). Responding to Tarrou's invitation for him to join the voluntary groups fighting the disease, Cottard observes: "It's not my job. [...] What's more, the plague suits me quite well and I see no reason why I should bother about trying to stop it" (132). Cottard's voice, then, is the voice of resignation, seeking solace in the anonymity of the plague,

and thereby represents a powerful counter to Rieux's stoic attitude in dealing with disease. Moreover, Cottard brings into sharp focus the problematic relationship between the self and others, a state of affairs in which a fear of contagion prevails (Leavy 190). The shameful manner of the eventual arrest of Cottard, "screaming at the top of his voice, being carried more than dragged out by the doorway" (249), is deliberately intended to leave a bad taste in order to reflect the danger of a lone individual with the potential to infect the therapeutic effort. Or, as Gray puts it, "[*The Plague*] thus warns us that the solitary and scandalous heart is always ready to awaken, like the plague, to test and threaten the collective" (176).

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With over five million copies sold in some thirty languages (Gray 176), *The Plague* is undoubtedly one of the most important works to emerge from France in the mid-twentieth century. As Williams reminds us, the work heralds an important new phase in Camus's body of writings: "In contrast with the Sisyphus cycle, [*The Plague*] presents a new human assertiveness and stoic, fighting spirit in the face of crushing forces" (14). This positive message provides a firm foundation for those – patients and medical practitioners - having to deal with illness and disease on a day-to-day basis. However, as Rieux records in the closing lines of his chronicle once the epidemic has ended, "the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good" (252): the modern diseases of HIV/AIDS and Ebola, with their fearful unpredictability (Boseley), bear tragic testimony to this fact. The "main theme of the novel" (Camus, "Carnets: 1942-1951" 39) - separation - underpins the experience of all these illnesses, where the invalid's isolation from the health of the community consolidates a sense of difference. In *The Plague*, the quarantine camps, situated in the local Sports Ground - normally a place of unity - reinforce this idea of isolation in emphatic fashion. And, at the end of the work and in his own lucid solitude, Rieux's old asthmatic patient – "the true genius of the plague", according to Lev Braun (95) – provides a sobering counter-thought to the



general euphoria around him following the opening of the town's gates and "a return to the golden age of health" (218):

"All those folk are saying, 'It was plague. We've had the plague here.' You'd almost think they expected to be given medals for it. But what does that mean - 'plague'? Just life, no more than that" (250).

Despite his own losses, Rieux can empathize with his fellow citizens and, in keeping with his stance of being on the side of the victim, he chooses this moment to articulate the motivations for writing his chronicle:

"so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour 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 a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise (251).

"*The Plague* is virtually guaranteed a place in the syllabus of any literature course taught to premedical and medical students", observes Barbara Leavy (203). Indeed, as we have seen, Camus's work provides a number of templates for patients and clinicians dealing with the daily reality of illness and disease. For the patient facing an uncertain future, the experience of the townspeople of Oran, "content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky" (63) is hardly reassuring. Yet the strength of Camus's work lies in its humanitarian struggle against adversity, "the frantic desire for life that thrives in the heart of every great calamity" (101). Rieux's pragmatic approach to dealing with the plague - "Salvation's much too big a word for me. I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me his health comes first" (178) - provides inspiration for both patients and practitioners alike, while the ethic of collective endeavor, arising through the resistance effort, offers a useful template for medical workers facing the common enemy of disease. The value lies in the *collective* effort. As Bronwyn Parrey, founder of King's College London's Department of Social Science, Health and Medicine, recently put it:

"Outbreaks such as Ebola or swine flu won't be resolved by people working on their own. We need collaborative interventions" (Pozniak 3). In the final analysis, *The Plague*, for all its harrowing descriptions of death and disease, highlights the humanitarian potential of interpersonal relations, a conclusion which, as early as January 1943, Camus is keen to draw from the experience of illness:

Illness is a cross, but perhaps a safety barrier as well. The ideal however would be to take its strength and refuse its weaknesses. Let it be the retreat which makes us stronger *at the time we choose*. And if we have to pay in the small change of suffering and self-denial, let us pay ("Carnets: 1942-1951" 35).

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. What lessons for dealing with disease and illness can be learned from *The Plague*?
- 2.