The Plague

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics

AUTHOR
Albert Camus

YEAR PUBLISHED
1947

GENRE
Allegory

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR
The Plague is narrated by Dr. Bernard Rieux, who often employs a third-person point of view to emphasize his objectivity.

TENSE
The Plague is told in the past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE
La Peste, the original French title of the novel, translates to *The Plague* in the American edition. The title refers to a terrible plague that strikes Oran, Algeria.

In Context

War and Plague

In 1933, Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party took control in Germany, and from there they continued to gain power and influence. In 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland and set off World War II. France and England declared war on Germany, but despite their efforts, France surrendered to German forces in 1940. German troops then marched into Paris on June 14, 1940, and occupied the city for the next four years. Many scholars have noted that *The Plague* is an allegory of the rise of fascism in Europe. Like the plague in Oran, European nations accommodated Hitler and the Nazi Party, refusing to face its true danger until it was nearly too late. Camus's novel highlights the similarities between war and plague: both cause suffering and death; both cause people to band together and fight; and both can come back unexpectedly and with a vengeance.

Existentialism, Absurdism, and Humanism

Existentialism is a philosophy that originated with the 19th-century philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard (although neither used the term). Existentialists believe the universe is devoid of any meaning and prefer to

concentrate on the realities and problems of being, or existence. Existentialists hold that because any effort to apply meaning to the universe is ridiculous, no absolute morality guides people's actions; individuals create their own morals and meaning through their choices. Although Camus agreed with many existentialist ideas, *The Plague*'s main characters seem to reflect an underlying moral code. Both Dr. Rieux and Jean Tarrou grapple with ideas of what is ethical, and both seem to conclude that doing one's duty and alleviating suffering are morally correct actions.

Absurdism is another philosophy that influenced Camus's work. In this view, meaning does not exist; it is simply something humans desire, and so they try to force an irrational universe into a rational box, causing pain. Absurdism is represented in several features of *The Plague*; for example, the man who spits on cats and the constantly changing weather.

Although Camus was greatly influenced by these philosophies, he was a humanist first, and so he believed in the value of human life. Except for Cottard, the main characters in *The Plague* all join together to help fight the epidemic, despite their differences. Their actions show a certain amount of heroism and bravery, traits that reflect a more positive view of humanity than either absurdism or existentialism would encourage.

Atheism

In his *Notebooks, 1951–1959,* Camus shared a somewhat conflicted view of religion, writing, "I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist." However, both *The Plague*'s narrator, Dr. Bernard Rieux, and his friend Jean Tarrou are atheists. They believe God does not exist. This view became popular during the 18th century, and the work of 19th-century scientist Charles Darwin increased its popularity, as the theory of evolution challenged some of the Church's ideas. In *The Plague*, Rieux and Tarrou embrace atheism, but they also find that without the moral teaching and language of the Church, they have to redefine terms (such as "saint") and work to understand their responsibility to their community. Throughout the novel, Rieux and Tarrou seem to believe they have a duty to fight against suffering and death.

Jean-Paul Sartre, an atheist philosopher and friend of Camus's (for a time), believed humans had to find meaning in existence apart from the idea of God and accept the consequences of their own actions. In many ways, Rieux and Tarrou struggle to do just these things in *The Plague*.

Author Biography

Albert Camus was born in Mondavi, French Algeria, on November 7, 1913. His parents, Lucien and Catherine Camus, were hardworking people of modest means, his father a vineyard worker and his mother a cleaning woman. When Albert was just eight months old, Lucien went away to fight in World War I, where he was fatally wounded in the Battle of the Marne. The loss of his father was a blow to the family. Albert, his mother, and his siblings were forced to live in a small apartment with Albert's uncles and grandmother. His grandmother ruled this diminutive domain with an iron hand, enforcing her will with a whip when necessary.

Albert began school in 1923, and his intelligence was quickly recognized by his teacher, Louis Germain. Germain helped Albert obtain a scholarship to high school. This proved to be a turning point in young Albert's life as he encountered people of various cultural, racial, and economic backgrounds and excelled academically as well as in swimming and soccer. He was introduced to French writers such as André Malraux and André Gide, who would have a lasting effect on him. But in 1930 he contracted tuberculosis, a contagious disease, and he had to leave school for a time. He could not live with his mother and siblings, either, for fear of passing the illness on to them. He went to live with his uncle and aunt, Gustave and Antoinette Acault. They treated him, in many ways, like a son. The Acaults were well read and enjoyed discussing politics and literature, unlike Camus's illiterate mother and grandmother.

When he recovered, Camus returned to school and there met philosopher and author Jean Grenier, whose book *Islands* is remarkable for connecting ideas and linking the author to his readers and to society at large; it would have a lasting effect on Camus's literary style. Grenier encouraged Camus to publish a few pieces of writing in *Sud*, a literary journal. This achievement gave Camus a taste for publication. By the time Camus entered the University of Algiers in 1933, Grenier had become a professor there, and so his mentorship of Camus continued. Grenier also encouraged Camus to join the Communist Party, but the political association between Camus and the Party ended in 1937 when Camus differed with communist policies and was kicked out.

Throughout these tumultuous years, Camus continued to write

and publish a number of plays and essays. At this time, his published works included two volumes of essays, *Betwixt and Between* (1937) and *Nuptials* (1938). These volumes and another book of essays titled *Summer* (1954) are considered by critics to be among his best writing. They focus on Algiers and contrast pleasures discovered in nature such as the sun and sea with the darkness of realities such as poverty and death. He also worked on the staff of a political newspaper, but when World War II began, the paper was no longer published, and Camus relocated to Paris to work for another newspaper as an editorial secretary. He finished work on his famous novel *The Stranger* during his time in Paris. The publication of this novel in 1942 brought Camus fame as an important French writer, and he was able to meet many prominent authors, artists, and philosophers, such as Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Pablo Picasso. He also joined the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. Then in 1942 he published an essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he discussed his view of the absurd—the separation between the lack of meaning in the universe and the human need for sense and purpose.

Beside being an important part of Camus's life experience, World War II also provided inspiration for *The Plague*. Although Camus used actual epidemics, such as the 1849 cholera epidemic that occurred in Oran, Algeria, as inspiration for the novel, the book is also an allegorical view of the rise of the Nazi party and the events surrounding World War II. The slow, reluctant recognition of the problem, the apathy of the initial response, the beginning of war, the long fight, the victory, and the warning people must remember what occurred to avoid its occurring again, all parallel the events and concerns of World War II. *The Plague* proved to be tremendously successful, selling more than 100,000 copies and being translated into more than a dozen languages.

In addition to *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, Camus contributed several other novels, plays, short stories, and essays to French literature. These include *The Rebel* (1951), *The Fall* (1956), and *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957). Camus received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957. After he was killed in an automobile accident on January 4, 1960, two books were published posthumously: *A Happy Death* (1970) and *The First Man* (1995).

Characters

Dr. Bernard Rieux

A humanist who takes seriously his duty to help the sick, Dr. Bernard Rieux faithfully chronicles what happens in Oran as a result of the plague and thoughtfully considers the nature and effects of human suffering. As a resident of the city, he is in a good position to tell the story of what happens there, and he feels that part of his duty—apart from helping the sick—is to write an account of the plague. Although he has his own personal trial (a sick wife from whom he is parted), he consistently does his duty. In fact, he cannot think of acting any differently, even though he is not always sure why. Dr. Rieux forms friendships with Raymond Rambert, Joseph Grand, and Jean Tarrou; the interactions with these men give him opportunities to explore his understanding of suffering, love, death, humanity, and ethics.

Jean Tarrou

Jean Tarrou, a visitor to Oran who is trapped there when the plague begins, enriches Dr. Rieux's account with details he records in his journal. These detailed observations are so completely objective that they do not always even distinguish between information that is important and irrelevant. Tarrou is an atheist who tries to articulate his ideas about morality, death, suffering, and duty without relying on religious language. Sometimes, he redefines religious terms, such as saint, in atheist terms. He prefers simple, direct, truthful expression. He admires those who live authentically despite the value of their actions to society, although he himself seems to feel a strong sense of responsibility to the community.

Joseph Grand

Joseph Grand is an older man who works for the city of Oran. He has had a mediocre career, without advancement. After years of a mediocre marriage, his wife has left him. Grand's main problem is that he has great difficulty finding the right words to express himself. He is trying to write a letter to his wife, to reach out to her, but he can not find the right words.

He is also trying to write a novel, but he can't get past the first sentence. Part of his problem is that he is searching for the perfect words, and this search for the perfect words becomes an obstacle to any progress.

Raymond Rambert

Raymond Rambert spends most of the novel trying to escape, first through legal means and then, when that goes nowhere, through illegal means. His focus is to escape and see the woman he loves; as a result, he provides a contrast to Dr. Bernard Rieux who has put his feelings for his wife to the side in order to focus on combating the plague.

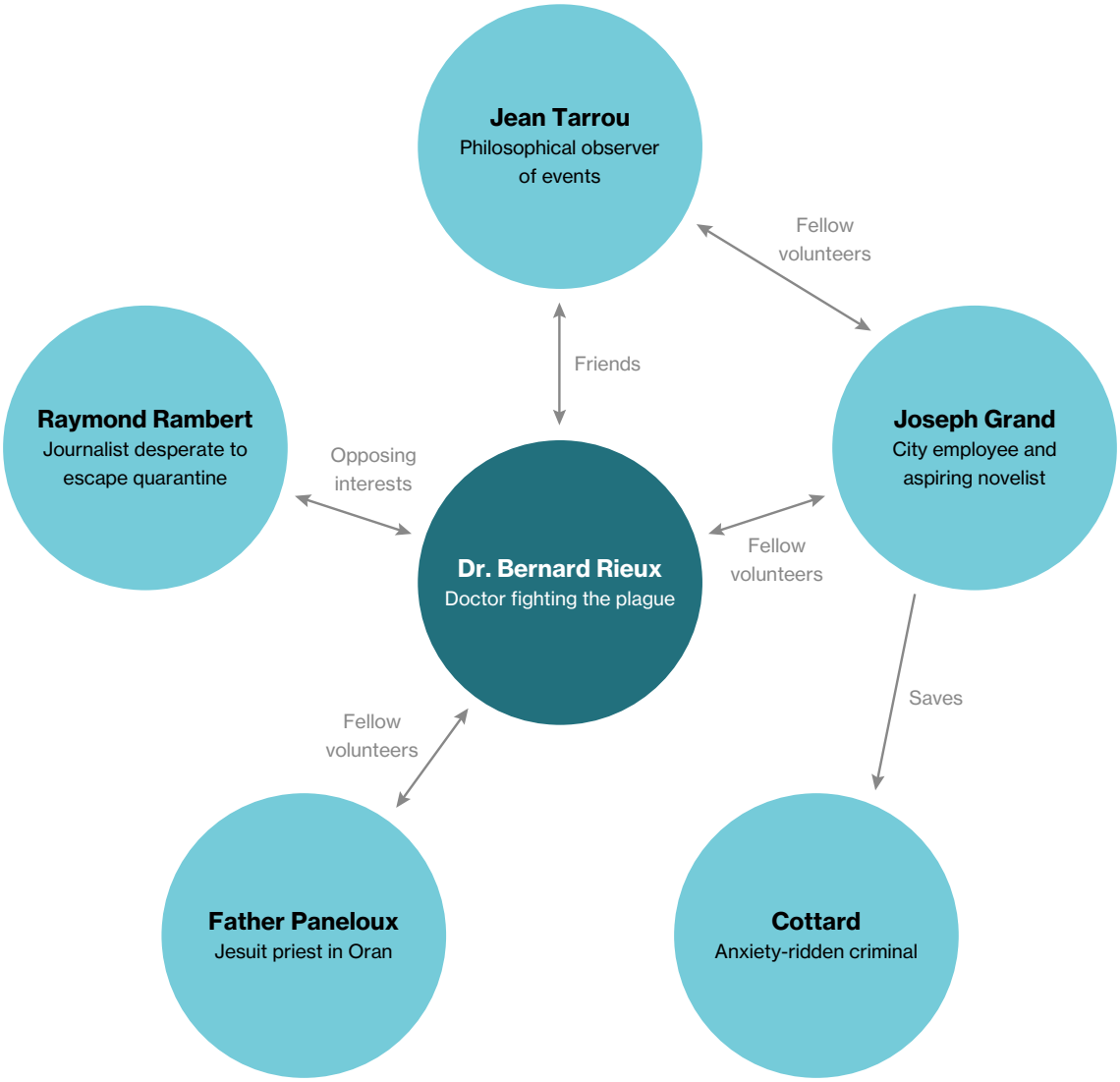
Cottard

Before the plague begins, Cottard lives in fear of arrest for an illegal act. In fact, when readers first learn of Cottard, he's just tried to commit suicide out of anxiety. As the plague ravages Oran, however, Cottard finds a kind of happiness. First he is comforted that now everyone is living in fear, not just him. Second, the plague provides ample opportunity for profitable illegal activities, mostly smuggling, since the gates are shut and there are no goods coming in by legal channels. When the plague recedes, Cottard, predictably, doesn't react well.

Father Paneloux

Father Paneloux first reacts to the plague by declaring in a passionate sermon that the plague is a punishment from God for the faithless ways of the citizens of Oran. However, as the plague rages on, Paneloux becomes a volunteer, taking care of the sick. He witnesses the disease attacking the old, young, rich, poor, guilty, and innocent (including the young Jacques Othon), and it becomes harder for him to believe his own words. He maintains the plague is somehow part of God's good and perfect plan, and believes that as a Christian he must accept it, or reject God. However, shortly after preaching a sermon to this effect, he becomes ill. Since his illness bears no resemblance to the plague, Dr. Rieux rules it a "doubtful case."

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Dr. Bernard Rieux	Dr. Bernard Rieux is a doctor in Oran and the narrator of the story.
Jean Tarrou	Jean Tarrou is a philosophical visitor to Oran whose notes provide many of the details of Dr. Bernard Rieux's account.
Joseph Grand	Joseph is a government clerk struggling with lack of job advancement, a failed marriage, and unsuccessful attempts at writing.
Raymond Rambert	A Paris journalist, Raymond Rambert is trapped in the city when the quarantine begins.
Cottard	A paranoid, fearful criminal, Cottard finds that the plague improves his life in more ways than one.
Father Paneloux	A Jesuit priest, Father Paneloux tries to make sense of the plague in religious terms.
Asthmatic Man	A Spaniard with asthma is one of Dr. Rieux's patients and expresses the perspective of Oran's citizens.
Dr. Castel	Dr. Castel correctly diagnoses the strange illness as the plague, and later develops the anti-plague serum.
Garcia	Garcia is a criminal who puts Rambert in touch with Raoul in efforts to help Rambert escape the quarantined city.
Gonzales	Gonzales is a criminal who tries to arrange Rambert's escape.
Jeanne Grand	Jeanne is Joseph Grand's wife, to whom he wants to write a letter, but can't find the right words for it.
Louis	Louis is a sentry who tries to help Rambert escape.
Marcel	Marcel is a sentry who tries to help Rambert escape.
M. Michel	M. Michel works in Dr. Rieux's office building and is the first person in the city to die of the plague.
Jacques Othon	The son of M. Othon, Jacques Othon dies after he receives a failed anti-plague serum.
M. Othon	M. Othon is a judge in the city of Oran.
Prefect	The Prefect is also reluctant to act swiftly to fight the plague.
Raoul	Raoul is hired to help Rambert escape the city.
Dr. Richard	Dr. Richard shows reluctance to acknowledge the illness as the plague and to take any action to fight it.
Mme. Rieux	Mme. Rieux, Dr. Rieux's mother, comes to live with him while his sick wife is away.
Mme. Rieux	Mme. Rieux, Dr. Rieux's wife, is absent for most of the novel, and dies as the plague finally recedes.
Spitting Man	A man who gleefully spits on cats is a representative of the absurd.

Plot Summary

The novel is set in the 1940s in the Algerian city of Oran. A strange thing has begun happening in Oran. Rats are emerging into the streets, where they move awkwardly in a sort of dance, then bleed profusely and die. At first there are just a few. Then their numbers grow. Soon rats are dying this way by the thousands, so many that they have to be piled and burned. Dr. Bernard Rieux, a physician, recognizes the way the rats are dying is odd and know it is probably not a good sign.

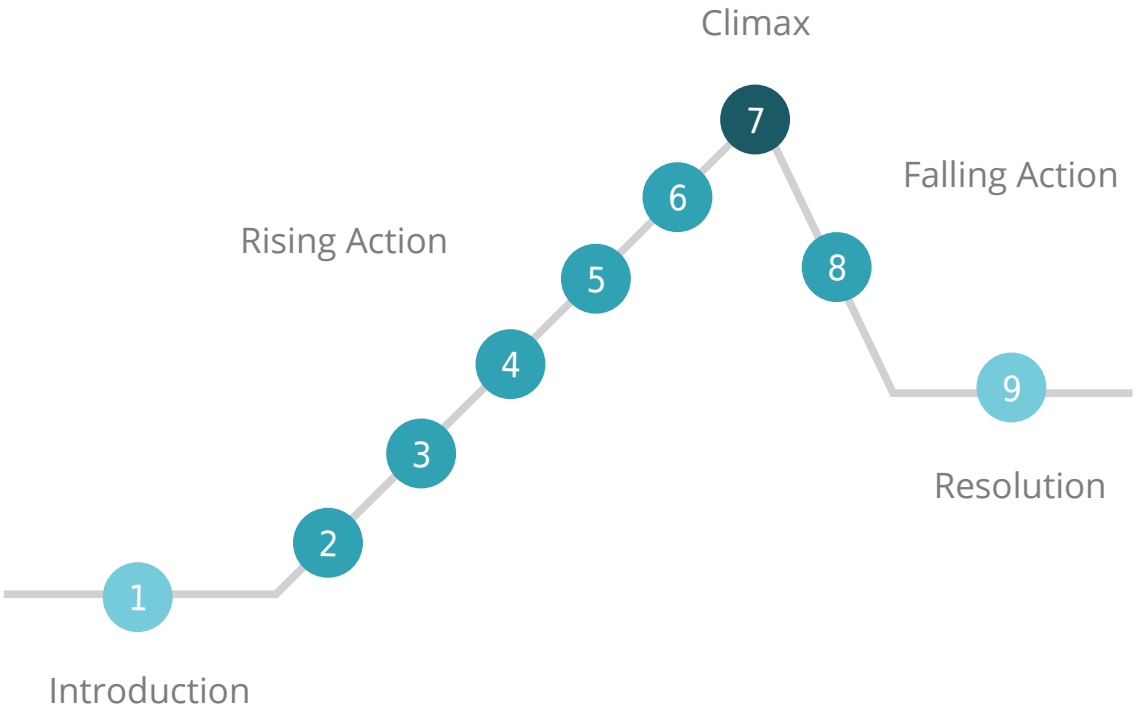
After a while the rats stop dying. But before anyone can breathe a sigh of relief that the rat episode is over, people start showing disconcerting symptoms. They begin to die in much

the same way as the rats. Dr. Castel, who works with Dr. Rieux, comes to believe the symptoms are those of the Black Plague. However, the city leaders are reluctant to acknowledge what is happening, even as the death toll grows, apathetic to the human suffering taking place under their noses.

Eventually, the city leaders are forced to take the situation seriously, and they quarantine the city. No one can enter or leave. Several things happen as a result. The city's residents are plunged into despair and spend all their time talking about how bad off they are and how they miss those who are far away. Raymond Rambert, a journalist visiting Oran from Paris, attempts to leave the city. When he is unsuccessful using normal channels, he pursues illegal ones. This leads him to strike up an acquaintance with Cottard, a smuggler, who recently attempted suicide and was saved by Joseph Grand, a man who is unsuccessful in job, marriage, and writing. Father Paneloux, a priest, believes the plague is God's punishment for sin and says as much in a sermon.

Jean Tarrou, a visitor confined to the city when it is quarantined, observes and keeps a journal of what is happening. He also recruits Dr. Rieux, Joseph Grand, and others to help fight the spread of the plague. Yet the plague continues to ravage the city, filling hospitals and cemeteries as it becomes increasingly contagious. A serum is developed but turns out to be a failure. More people die, including the young son of a magistrate, Jean Tarrou, Dr. Rieux's wife, and Father Paneloux. Eventually plague deaths begin to decline, and a new version of the serum seems to be effective. The quarantine is lifted, and the gates of the town are opened. Dr. Rieux is revealed to be the narrator of the story, telling readers his motivation for writing this "true account" was to document the "common suffering" he witnessed so that it would not be forgotten.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Rats begin to die in the town of Oran.

Rising Action

2. The number of dead rats increases exponentially.

3. Human deaths begin, and the disease is diagnosed as plague.

4. Oran is placed under quarantine, and the gates are shut.

5. Early attempts to use an anti-plague serum fail.

6. The plague takes on a more deadly and contagious form.

Climax

7. Joseph Grand recovers from illness; the plague declines.

Falling Action

8. Jean Tarrou dies.

Resolution

9. The plague is over; the gates of Oran are opened.

Timeline of Events

April 16, 1940s

Dr. Bernard Rieux notices a dead rat.

April 25

6,231 dead rats are collected and burned in one day.

May

Oran has a Week of Prayer; Father Paneloux gives a sermon.

Late October

Castel's serum is tried on Jacques Othon, but the child dies.

November

Bubonic plague transforms into the more deadly pneumonic plague.

Around Christmas

Plague deaths decrease; live rats reappear.

January 25

Oran authorities declare the plague officially "stemmed."

February

Jean Tarrou dies; Dr. Bernard Rieux receives word his wife is dead.

February

The gates of Oran are opened.

Chapter Summaries

Albert Camus divided *The Plague* into five parts. This study guide provides a summary and analysis of each chapter within those parts.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Summary

The "unusual events" of the story, told by an as-yet-unnamed narrator, begin in the port town of Oran, Algeria, in the 1940s, a place known for its ordinariness. An ugly town defined more by what it does not have than what it has, Oran is full of people for whom the activities of life—working, loving, dying—have become matters of habit. Work has become devoid of any meaning other than to make money. Even pleasures, such as gathering with friends or having sex, have become predictable and uninteresting. The act of dying in the town is, as a result, even more lonely and distressing than dying elsewhere, since there is a lack of true caring among the citizens.

The narrator, who tells us he will be revealed "in due course," explains he will tell what happened in Oran as objectively as possible, even though he was a part of the events.

Analysis

Although the narrator does not introduce himself by name, this opening chapter actually reveals a good deal of information about him. He says he'll take on the role of historian: "Naturally, a historian, even an amateur, always has data, personal or at second hand, to guide him. The present narrator has three kinds of data: what he saw himself; the accounts of other eyewitnesses (thanks to the part he played, he was enabled to learn their personal impressions from all those figuring in this chronicle); and, documents that subsequently came into his hands." The objective tone taken here is meant to impress upon the reader the factual nature of the account. Although the events are fictional, the emphasis on the truthfulness of the chronicle suggests the author believes there is a kind of truth contained in the novel. The narrator clearly identifies the three types of knowledge he will rely on for his account: his own experiences, documents (Jean Tarrou's journal), and the stories he hears from others as he goes about his life in Oran during the plague. His parenthetical remark should give careful readers a clue to the narrator's identity: he played a part that allowed him to learn the "personal impressions" of all of the people included in the book.

The setting is the coastal city of Oran, in the 1940s. In 1940, several European nations had declared war on Germany, but the United States did not join the war until 1941. Nazi armies marched into Paris on June 14, 1940, and would occupy the city for the next four years. Ties to the rise of the Nazi party in World War II are important for an allegorical interpretation of the novel.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Summary

As Dr. Bernard Rieux is leaving his surgery one April morning, he steps on a dead rat and kicks it aside. He tells the concierge, M. Michel, about the rat on the second-floor landing. M. Michel is outraged at the idea there could be a rat on the premises. Later, Dr. Rieux sees another rat as he is unlocking the door to his apartment. This rat staggers toward him, spins around, and falls over, blood spurting from its mouth. Dr. Rieux goes into his apartment, thinking more about his wife, who is ill and leaving for a sanatorium in the morning, than about the rat. But the next morning, Dr. Rieux learns three dead rats have been found in the hallway.

On his rounds, Dr. Rieux sees there are dead rats everywhere, and all of the people are talking about them. One patient, a Spaniard suffering from asthma, thinks the rats are hungry and have come out to look for food. M. Othon, the magistrate, is unconcerned about the rats, even though a man carrying a cage full of dead rats walks by as M. Othon and Dr. Rieux talk.

A journalist named Raymond Rambert visits Dr. Rieux later that day to ask him about the living conditions of the Arabs in Oran. Dr. Rieux encourages him to look into the rat question instead. Dr. Rieux speaks with another visitor to town, Jean Tarrou, who also seems intrigued by the strange behavior and deaths of the rats. The next day, Dr. Rieux's mother arrives to stay and help out while his wife is away.

Soon the number of dead rats has increased into the thousands, and people start to become concerned. The town authorities acknowledge the rat problem, mostly by making radio announcements about it, but do not take measures to stop the pestilence from spreading. M. Michel becomes ill, and Dr. Rieux sends him home to bed. Shortly thereafter, the doctor gets a call from Joseph Grand, who just saved a man named Cottard from hanging himself. As Dr. Rieux travels home from the scene, he observes there are no new dead rats along the way. This seems like good news, but later that day Dr. Rieux has a patient with a high fever and black patches on his skin. Other people in town are coming down with similar symptoms.

The next day, M. Michel dies.

Analysis

The narrator, continuing to insist upon the factual, objective nature of his account, includes exact dates of events and, often, exact numbers of dead rats on those dates. These details do not just add to the journalistic style, however. They demonstrate the very short time it takes the rat problem to escalate while working to dehumanize the action. To readers, the situation seems to be spiraling out of control; in just a few weeks, the story moves from one dead rat to thousands. The dehumanistic response is portrayed well by M. Michel, who represents the attitude displayed at all levels of the population: denial. Of course, there can be no dead rat! Nonsense! Compounded by the seeming indifference of the authorities, this denial causes a lack of action on the problem of the rats and painfully slow acknowledgement there is even a problem.

The finding of the first rat is significant because it is one of two bookends of this eventful chapter. The chapter opens with the death of one rat, and it ends with the death of one man. The first rat is significant, too, because it reminds Dr. Rieux of his ill wife and their impending separation. Little does he know that at this early stage, their separation from one another will not be a unique story as there will be many cases of parted lovers. Dr. Rieux's parting from his wife parallels the other cases of parted lovers in the novel, of which there are two kinds: those who are eventually reunited and those who are not.

This chapter introduces several of the main characters as Dr. Rieux interacts with them each in turn. Raymond Rambert, Jean Tarrou, and Mme. Rieux, all visitors from out of town, come to Oran for various purposes. An interaction between Rambert and Dr. Rieux reveals Dr. Rieux's desire for the absolute truth, a trait readers will find he shares with Jean Tarrou, whom he befriends.

M. Othon, Joseph Grand, and Cottard are, like Dr. Rieux, residents of the town. It also introduces the asthmatic patient who reflects both an element of the absurd and the generally irrational voice of the townspeople. In this chapter, he dismisses the rats, saying they are probably just hungry.

In an allegorical reading, the indifference and failure to act quickly to the pestilence on the part of the authorities, combined with the ineffective but alarming public radio announcements, is roughly equivalent to the way Europe and the United States first reacted to the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany.

Part 1, Chapter 3

Summary

It turns out M. Michel's death is just the first of several similar deaths all over town. The narrator explains that some of the details he is including in his account are based on the somewhat quirky notes of Jean Tarrou, who was introduced briefly in the previous chapter. Tarrou arrived only weeks before and is staying at a hotel in town.

Tarrou includes important events in his notebook, as well as seemingly random and unimportant details. Once such detail is a description of the trombone-playing habits of one of the dead men. Another is an account of an old man who spits on cats until, one day, no cats appeared and so he spat on nothing. When the cats appeared again, he resumed spitting on them. Tarrou's notes include a conversation between himself and his hotel manager, in which the manager is angry that even his expensive hotel has dead rats in it.

Analysis

Tarrou's journal includes both important events relevant to the plague and seemingly random observations of the characters in Oran, forcing readers to judge for themselves what is significant. The implication is that had the citizens done so, the

town might have been better prepared to deal with the plague.

The spitting man represents the absurd; his actions have no greater meaning. He simply enjoys spitting on cats. Tarrou seems to find the man delightful, suggesting Tarrou approves of a man who lives life according to his own nature and not by society's ideas about what actions are considered correct. The presence of the spitting man suggests human action, in itself, is as meaningless as a man spitting on cats. This may be true, but it's a dangerous position for a leader to adopt.

Part 1, Chapter 4

Summary

Dr. Rieux calls his colleague, Dr. Richard, and they discuss the sickness. Dr. Rieux wants to quarantine patients with the concerning symptoms, but Dr. Richard notes only the Prefect of the town has that power. The weather turns hot and humid, and the residents of the town feel feverish and ill.

Dr. Rieux drives to visit Joseph Grand and Cottard to wrap up the loose ends of the suicide attempt. He learns from Joseph Grand the red chalk Cottard had used to write his suicide "note" had actually been lent to him by Grand, who had bought it to help him improve his Latin. Rieux, accompanied by a policeman, visits Cottard to discuss the suicide attempt. Cottard is extremely reluctant to talk to the police officer, and he can't seem to give a good answer as to why he wished to kill himself. But he assures them he will not try it a second time.

Later Dr. Rieux talks with his colleagues Dr. Richard and Dr. Castel; they agree the illness killing people is the bubonic plague. Although they acknowledge many people believe the plague has disappeared from Europe, Dr. Rieux suggests it never really disappears.

Analysis

This chapter shows one way that the weather in Oran relates to the events in town: it mirrors them. The weather is hot, and the people are feverish, undermining other evidence in the novel that life is absurd and has no meaning.

The characters of Joseph Grand and Cottard are introduced in more depth through the event of Cottard's suicide attempt. Grand has a hard time coming up with just the right words to explain his impression of Cottard. These are clues that will later become important as it is revealed Grand is trying to write a letter to his wife and a novel (and he is struggling with both). Throughout the novel, Grand's struggle to express himself alludes to the struggle all humans have to find language that will bridge the gap between themselves and others. Cottard, on the other hand, cares little for language; in fact he prefers not to express himself, especially to police officers. This inability to communicate is one reason he tries to end his life.

Part 1, Chapter 5

Summary

The narrator explains a plague is similar to a war: common in all times and places, yet, somehow surprising. Also, people think wars and plagues are stupid, but stupidity persists and often seems to be a dominant force. People treat plagues and wars like nightmares that are scary, but not real, yet they die anyway. This difficulty in facing the reality of the plague is even a problem for Dr. Rieux.

Dr. Rieux reviews the symptoms of plague in his mind and considers the history of its outbreaks in various places. He decides he just needs to do his job, and he'd better get on with it.

Analysis

In case readers did not make the connection between World War II and the plague, the narrator is making it very clear. Both war and plague are things humans would prefer to ignore, so they do. They are surprised by them when they inevitably come. The narrator suggests war and plague, in fact, are the norm, not the exception. One way people can perhaps stop avoiding the subject of war, plague, or mortality, is to look it in the face. Statistics will not work, says the narrator. People have to see the actual faces of the dead before they will believe in plague and war.

At the end of this chapter, Dr. Rieux makes a decision. He must do what he can do: be a doctor. He decides to take action. This, readers will find, is a defining characteristic of Dr. Rieux.

Part 1, Chapter 6

Summary

Joseph Grand, Cottard, and Dr. Rieux are discussing the plague, though no one wants to say the word *plague*. Joseph Grand, who works for the town, has the unpleasant duty of counting the number of dead. So far, in the first two days of the plague, 11 people have died. After Cottard and Grand have gone their separate ways, Dr. Rieux considers Joseph Grand, revealing that Grand has been passed over for promotion at work for the entire 20 years at his position, and that the man has a difficult time expressing himself in words but is still attempting to write a book. Overall, Rieux seems to think Grand is a good sort.

Analysis

The fact that no one wants to say *plague* aloud suggests there is some power in using language to name something. One of the book's themes is the inadequacy of language, or the difficulty of finding the correct language, and this reluctance to use the right word contributes to the theme by suggesting that to say a thing aloud is a way of acknowledging it. No one wants to acknowledge the plague, so they do not say the word.

This difficulty with the word *plague* segues into a more lengthy description of Joseph Grand, whose main characteristic throughout the book is his inability to arrive at the right words to say what he means. His attempt to write a novel despite this limitation echoes the efforts of Dr. Rieux and others to fight the plague. In both cases, they must continue to work at what seems to be an overwhelming task, with no certainty the end result will matter. Both of their efforts are intended to improve the human condition, and neither has any certainty of success.

Part 1, Chapter 7

Summary

A meeting with the Prefect of Oran has been set, and Dr. Rieux and Dr. Castel ride together to attend. Rieux tells Castel he sent word to Paris asking for anti-plague serum. When they arrive at the meeting, they begin by discussing whether they should publicly acknowledge the illness is the plague. Dr. Castel seems willing to fudge the truth to prevent panic, and Dr. Richard says he is willing to move slowly. But Dr. Rieux explains he has analyzed pus from one of the boils, and it came back positive for bubonic plague, and therefore they need to act quickly. Frustrated, he walks out of the meeting. On his way home, he passes a disturbing sight: a woman "screaming in agony," bleeding, and reaching her arms out to him.

Analysis

In the meeting, Dr. Richard and Dr. Rieux have an exchange that speaks to the theme of language and Joseph Grand's predicament. Dr. Richard wants Dr. Rieux to be absolutely sure that the word *plague* is correct. But Dr. Rieux has an interesting response. He suggests that it doesn't matter "how you phrase it," actions matter. Rather than searching endlessly for just the right word, he suggests, they should take action: "we should not act as if there were no likelihood that half the population would be wiped out; for then it would be."

On his way home Dr. Rieux encounters a woman whose suffering must reinforce his determination to take action rather than remain passive. The dramatic, visceral image of the bleeding woman stands as a contrast to the distance with which the town leaders had discussed the plague. While endless debates go on behind closed doors, real people are suffering terrible pain and dying in awful ways.

Part 1, Chapter 8

Summary

Town leaders post fliers that inform the public about the illness and what they are doing about it (measures such as killing the rats, who are mostly dead already), but they post them in out-of-the-way places to avoid public panic. A conversation between Grand and Dr. Rieux reveals 10 more people have died. The conversation turns to Cottard, whose business is reportedly in wine sales. Cottard has been awfully friendly (and a great tipper) since his suicide attempt. He's been acting odd in other ways, as well.

Later Dr. Rieux and Dr. Castel meet to talk about progress. Rieux tells Castel the serum has not arrived, and even if it does, it might not work. When Castel leaves, Rieux recognizes the odd feeling he has been having is actually fear. Dr. Rieux visits Cottard later, who seems very concerned about people getting arrested. He wonders if the police could arrest a man who is in the plague hospital ward.

Dr. Rieux is frustrated that people talk a lot about preventing the spread of the plague, yet no one is actually doing anything. He tells the Prefect this, and the Prefect agrees to implement Rieux's recommendations: reporting new cases, quarantining those infected, and following proper burial procedures. These measures seem to work at first, and the numbers of dead decline. However, they soon rise again. The authorities finally agree to "proclaim a state of plague" and quarantine the town.

Analysis

It is hard to imagine anything that illustrates the total dysfunction of the government response better than the posting of flyers "discretely," warning people of plague in places where people are unlikely to see them.

Cottard's odd behavior is revealed in a conversation between Dr. Rieux and Joseph Grand. Grand says Cottard has been more "amiable" than before, and when Rieux asks him "wasn't he amiable before?" Grand is at a loss for words. He does not think "unamiable" is quite the right word to describe what Cottard was before, but he cannot figure out a good word. This is typical behavior for Grand, whose inability to find the right words is the one flaw that has "plagued" him throughout his life. Grand is finally able to express that Cottard used to be aloof and mistrusting of everyone he met, but now he is being friendly toward everyone. Grand suggests Cottard is "a man with something pretty serious on his conscience."

At the end of the chapter, the narrator again describes the weather—this time noting spring has come, a "spring was like any other." In fact, everything seems to go on as usual, outside of the plague. People sell flowers, the spitting man spits on cats, Grand writes, the asthmatic man transfers his peas from one pan to the other, and so on, just as usual. But then, something happens to change all that, bringing the normal activities to a screeching halt: a state of plague is declared, and the town is quarantined. Camus, who employs contrasting images to great effect throughout the novel, here gives another: the image of life as usual with the image of Dr. Rieux reading the fateful telegram: "*Proclaim a state of plague stop close the town*."

Part 2, Chapter 9

Summary

Under quarantine, the citizens of Oran are lonely and afraid. They suddenly begin to think of all the loved ones who live far away, and miss them, even if they have not thought about them in years. The town authorities decide to allow people to enter but not to exit the town, but the only person who wants to do this is Dr. Castel's wife, who has only been gone a few days. Those who cannot be with their loved ones suffer even more because they worry about how much their loved ones miss them, too. They cannot bear to face their situation, but they cannot completely deny it either. So they live a halfway existence that is a shadow of reality. Although the people share a common source of suffering and fear, each person's particular experience is unique, so they cannot seem to find comfort in shared suffering.

The narrator explains parted lovers have it especially bad, but this tends to work to their advantage, since they are so busy missing each other, they do not have time to panic.

Analysis

Part 2 opens with "From now on, it can be said that plague was the concern of all of us." The sentence both reminds readers the narrator is one of the residents of the town and pulls readers into the action, making "the plague" a universal state of suffering.

The nature of suffering is developed in this chapter, as the narrator describes the way it gives everyone something in common ("the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike") as well as separates them from one another (they each "had to bear the load of his troubles alone"). The ebb and flow of the town's sense of togetherness as a result of the plague—the way it binds people together while also parting them, sometimes forever—is a constant tension in the novel as it is in Camus's personal philosophy.

The narrator also reminds readers of the indifference of the universe and the human tendency to try to make sense of its absurdity as he describes how, just days before, people said good-bye to their loved ones, thinking they would see them again in just a short time. They all were, "duped by our blind human faith in the near future." The importance of confronting reality, including the reality of death, the absurdity of life, and so on, is emphasized again as the narrator remarks, "Always a moment came when we had to face the fact that no trains were coming in. And then we realized that the separation was destined to continue, we had no choice but to come to terms with the days ahead."

Grand's problem of being unable to find the right words is now shared by everyone in town, as letters in and out of the town are suspended, and only telegrams of 10 or fewer words are allowed, such as, "Am well. Always thinking of you. Love." The people are reduced to using "stock phrases" to describe their situation and feelings.

The weather is again used as an example of how people try to find meaning where there is none, as the people of Oran attach too much significance to the random weather patterns: "A burst of sunshine was enough to make them seem delighted with the world, while rainy days gave a dark cast to their faces and their mood."

Part 2, Chapter 10

Summary

As activity in Oran grinds to a halt, the people begin to blame the town authorities for their situation. And although hundreds of people have died, and the number increases each week, people don't really take it all seriously until gas, electricity, and food rationing begins. Businesses close. People entertain themselves by drinking and watching the same movie over and over at the theater.

The chapter shifts back to two days after the quarantine began, when Dr. Rieux meets Cottard on the street. Cottard says he is feeling very well—never better, in fact. He relates several stories of people suffering and dying to Rieux, but he is pleased and "gleeful" about them. Later that same day, Rieux also talks with Joseph Grand, who tells Rieux about his wife—meeting her, marrying her, how he had "failed to keep alive the feeling in his wife that she was loved," and how she has now left him. Grand notes he's been trying to write to her, but he cannot find the right words.

A few weeks later, Rieux meets Rambert, who explains he needs a doctor's note saying he is free of the plague so he can try to get out of the city to his wife, who is in Paris. Rambert's been trying, but the town authorities have denied his request. Rieux refuses to put people at risk by writing such a note. Rambert accuses Rieux of speaking in abstractions, and later Rieux considers this idea. He decides when an abstraction starts killing, something must be done about it. As a doctor, he must treat plague patients, which he does for the remainder of the chapter.

Analysis

As this chapter begins, the narrator describes the general state of the population. They are unable to wrap their minds around what is happening. As in war, death rates climb to a point where they seem incomprehensible, and people go in and out of despair and denial. It is just too terrible to face, and the death toll becomes an abstraction of numbers and statistics rather than the concrete reality of blood and death.

Yet later in the chapter, Rambert and Rieux assess the conflict between the needs of the community and the needs of an individual. Dr. Rieux comes down on the side of doing what's best for society, while Rambert wants his own interests to be more meaningful. Rambert frames this debate in terms of "abstractions"—saying that Rieux's position is based on the abstraction while his own position is based on something more concrete: the happiness he finds in the love of a woman. An astute reader will notice that happiness and love are abstractions, but death in the form of the plague is a concrete reality.

Joseph Grand reveals that his trouble with words goes back a long way. He reveals his wife left him because, "[w]hile we loved each other we didn't need words to make ourselves understood. But people do not love forever. A time came when I should have found the words to keep her with me—only I couldn't." It is interesting he suggests love can take the place of words and perhaps vice versa.

Cottard's reaction to the plague is the inverse of the majority of the town's citizens. Without the plague he felt fearful and

alone. As the plague increases, Cottard feels better and more included, while everyone else feels fearful and separated from each other.

Part 2, Chapter 11

Summary

The town is about a month into the plague, and there is another sharp increase in cases. A Week of Prayer is declared, although normally the people of Oran are not "particularly devout." Father Paneloux, known for his "lectures on present-day individualism," gives a passionate sermon claiming that the plague is God's punishment of Oran, because despite His love for them, its people have neglected Him. He encourages the people to offer a prayer of love to God, and trust God to "see to the rest."

Analysis

Like Rambert, who wants his logical arguments to convince the authorities to let him out of the city, Father Paneloux also wants to apply some sort of logic to the situation. Part of the point of the novel is that plague, like war and weather, is not logical, but irrational. While Rambert wants to reason his way out of the plague, Paneloux wants to make the plague itself a logical, predictable occurrence—the logical consequence of the lack of piety among its population.

Part 2, Chapter 12

Summary

Anxiety increases to panic in Oran. Joseph Grand and Dr. Rieux talk at a cafe a few days after Father Paneloux's sermon, and Grand describes the book he is writing. The two go to Grand's home where Grand gives Rieux a peek at his work on the book so far. Surprisingly, Grand has only written one sentence: "One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horsewoman might have been riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne." Suddenly they hear the noise of people running past outside, and when Dr. Rieux steps outside, he can see that many people are rushing toward the town's gates to attempt an escape.

Analysis

In the wake of Father Paneloux's sermon, hopelessness and panic reign. Some of the people of Oran feel as if they have been sentenced "for an unknown crime." The injustice of this makes some passive and some rebellious. The sense of injustice, however, is based on an expectation that justice exists, somewhere. This belief in an underlying justice is similar to Grand's belief in the existence of the "right" words. Camus seems to suggest that perfect justice and perfect language are both impossibilities, and appealing to them does more harm than good. In trying to achieve the impossible, Grand is unable to get past his one sentence. In trying to characterize the plague as God's justice, Father Paneloux makes matters worse rather than better.

Part 2, Chapter 13

Summary

Rambert is not rushing the gates, but he has been trying everything he can think of to get the authorities to let him leave town. He makes the argument that his case is exceptional, but the authorities point out that there are plenty of others with the same problem, so he is not exceptional at all. He does learn a lot about the "inner workings of a municipal office and a Prefect's headquarters," however. When Rambert's not calling people and filling out forms and trying to figure out how to get out of the city, he wanders listlessly around town—to cafes, lonely streets, and the train station—and thinks about his lover.

Analysis

Rambert's attempts to escape the city are laborious, logical, and persistent, as he struggles through the red tape of the town government. This is presented as a contrast to the panicked headlong rush of those who try to escape the gates by the brute force of fear. However, as the narrator points out, Rambert's greater "skill and persistence" does not equate to

greater success. Skill is irrelevant, persistence is irrelevant, and logic is irrelevant. Everyone in town is equally trapped; no one is exceptional. This echoes the complete indifference of the plague in how it chooses victims: the old, the young, the rich, the poor, the virtuous, and the criminal can all succumb to the plague. And it increases the novel's tension, embodied in the central question, "what, then, is the correct response to an illogical, impersonal fate?"

Part 2, Chapter 14

Summary

The death toll in Oran continues to accelerate to more than 700 per week as summer sets in and the weather turns even hotter. People of the city have taken to sitting inside with shades drawn to avoid the heat, while the town authorities enact more rules, schedule patrols, and shoot cats, thinking cats may be carrying the disease. Tarrou's notebooks inform readers that the old man who spits on cats again has no cats to spit on. Tarrou's journals also note that Mme. Othon, the magistrate's wife, is in quarantine because she had been taking care of a plague patient

who happened to be her mother. Tarrou also gives his unflattering opinion of Father Paneloux's sermon and a flattering opinion of Dr. Rieux's mother.

In addition, Tarrou records some interesting information about Dr. Rieux's asthmatic patient, the old Spaniard. The old man keeps time using a pan full of peas. He moves the peas from the full pan to an empty one, then back again, at a constant, carefully regulated speed. Tarrou is impressed with the man's ability to adhere to this habit.

Tarrou reports that people in Oran are bored, because there is nothing to do in town except think about the plague. And now that they have accepted the fact of the plague, they have begun to live luxuriously, buying expensive wines and seeking pleasure.

Analysis

This chapter begins by mentioning the weather, which has now turned to a scorching summer heat after an "unseasonable" rainfall. As much as people, including readers, would prefer that there were patterns and predictability in the weather, sometimes it is simply "unseasonable." The sky, like the plague, refuses to obey rules or abide by patterns.

Tarrou's journal plays an important role in the narrator's description of how the town is faring as spring turns to summer. Tarrou's observations, the narrator says, are of general trends, such as the fact that the newspapers are announcing deaths by the day, rather than the week now, but also include "such striking or moving incidents of the epidemic as came under his notice." These "striking or moving incidents" include the irrational and superstitious elements of people's behavior, such as the spitting man running out of cats to spit on or a woman opening her window, screaming, and closing it again. These images—individual versus community; large versus small—echo the concerns that Rieux and Rambert argued about, but also serve to give a more complete picture of the effects of plague. The town is still considering Paneloux's sermon, and Tarrou's notes also give his two cents about it. He says that at the beginning and end of a crisis there is a "propensity for rhetoric," but what is worth waiting for is the "in the thick of it" where "one gets hardened to the truth—in other words, to silence." In light of Joseph Grand's obsession with finding the perfect words, this insistence that truth is only revealed in silence is an interesting contrast.

This chapter also introduces Tarrou's interest in defining what a "saint" is. Here, he concludes that the old asthmatic patient is a saint if "saintliness is an aggregate of habits." The definition is a clue that may help us answer the novel's central question. Perhaps the only response to any fate is to continue living as one has always done.

Part 2, Chapter 15

Summary

The number of dead continues to escalate, and the serum that finally arrived does not seem to be working. Mme. Rieux, Dr. Rieux's mother, tells her son she doesn't fear the plague, because she is old. Jean Tarrou arrives at Dr. Rieux's home where Tarrou criticizes the government response to the plague crisis, and describes his own plan: recruit volunteers to help fight the plague. When Dr. Rieux objects to this idea, because it

would put people at risk of contracting the disease, Tarrou asks him if he heard Father Paneloux's sermon. This leads into a discussion about the existence of God and human duty. Dr. Rieux is of the opinion that people should try to relieve human suffering before they proclaim that suffering is good or just, as Father Paneloux did.

Dr. Rieux also tells Tarrou that he does not believe in God, which makes Tarrou curious about why Rieux wants to help people if he doesn't believe in God. Rieux explains that he helps people because he does not believe God will do it. If he believed God would heal people, he would not bother with them. He also explains that his career has allowed him to see people face, and struggle against, death. He thinks people should both accept and struggle against death, and Tarrou agrees with this sentiment. Tarrou again pitches his idea about recruiting volunteers, saying that his code of morals, "comprehension," has prompted him to take action.

Analysis

In Chapter 8 of Part 1, the Prefect tells Dr. Rieux that he will send for and await orders as to how to act in response to the plague. Later, Dr. Rieux fumes scornfully to Dr. Castel, "Orders! When what's needed is imagination." In this chapter, Tarrou has a similar response to the poorly organized government attempts to recruit volunteers to a plague-fighting effort. "What they're short on is imagination," he scoffs. This commonality between the two characters sets the stage for a friendship and partnership between the two men that will grow as the novel progresses. And the idea that human ingenuity can solve problems when a more bureaucratic approach fails is part of Camus' humanism, which is a more optimistic viewpoint than existentialism.

As Dr. Rieux and Tarrou share their ideas about how to combat the plague, Father Paneloux's sermon becomes a point of reference once again. Rieux admits that, like Paneloux, he sees that suffering can bring out the best in people, because it "helps men to rise above themselves." But rather than bowing down to it as an inevitable punishment, like Paneloux, he suggests that the benefit of suffering only comes when people refuse to "give in tamely," but instead, struggle against it.

It is important that Rieux chalks up the difference between himself and Paneloux not to a fundamental conceptual difference—belief or disbelief in God—but to a difference in experience: "[Paneloux] hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth—with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do." Suffering, Rieux claims, has been his teacher.

Part 2, Chapter 16

Summary

Tarrou manages to get several people to volunteer in the fight against the plague. The narrator has some opinion about what motivated these people to volunteer and decides that it was simply the logical thing to do. Dr. Castel is busy working on a new serum—one that takes into account the new strain of plague bacteria they have in Oran.

Grand, Rieux, and Tarrou often get together to talk about Grand's book, and in one of their discussions Grand reveals that he has made some progress: changing "elegant" to "slim" in his sentence. Grand has also been having some trouble at his job, since he is spending so much thought and time on the book and on the volunteering.

Dr. Rieux then considers the way that the radio reports of what is going on in town fail to reflect the reality of the situation. Words just cannot express what is happening. And those who are outside the town—who are not experiencing the suffering firsthand—cannot understand it.

Analysis

The narrator begins this chapter by giving his opinion of what makes an action morally right or wrong. He doesn't agree with praising the good actions of the volunteers, because he believes that makes these good people seem like the exception rather than the rule, and, in his view, people are more good than bad. It is ignorance that makes actions helpful or harmful. He also claims that fighting the plague was not about doing what was "right" but about saving the "the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation."

Joseph Grand is held up as a heroic figure, because he "was the true embodiment of the quiet courage that inspired the

sanitary groups." He immediately says "yes" to volunteering to fight the plague, with a matter-of-fact attitude: "Plague is here and we've got to make a stand, that's obvious." Grand embodies the "insignificant and obscure hero who had to his credit only a little goodness of heart and a seemingly absurd ideal." He does his duty without complaint, yet struggles to achieve the impossible: the perfect sentence. The heroes, according to Camus, are those who continually struggle against plague and for an impossible goal. The heroes are thus contrasted with the "saint," who marks time with his peas. Now, the reader has two answers to the novel's question, in direct contradiction with one another: saints blithely accept their fate; heroes struggle against it.

Part 2, Chapter 17

Summary

Rambert decides he will have to pursue illegal means to escape Oran. Cottard hears Rambert share this sentiment with Dr. Rieux and later approaches Rambert. Cottard says he knows people who can help Rambert escape. After all, Cottard is now in the smuggling business, so he knows plenty of folks who do that sort of business. Cottard introduces Rambert to Garcia, a smuggler, and Garcia recommends another man, Raoul. A meeting is arranged for a few days later. At the meeting, another meeting is set up with Gonzales. When Gonzales and Rambert meet again, Gonzales introduces Rambert to two more men, Marcel and Louis. Another meeting is planned. Rambert keeps trying to close the deal with one of the smugglers and make his escape, but cannot seem to make it happen.

Tarrou attempts to recruit Cottard as a volunteer, and Cottard says he is doing such good business as a smuggler, he has plenty to do. Rieux mentions that smuggling might get Cottard in trouble with the law, and Cottard has a panic attack. He reveals that he has feared arrest for years, and in fact, this is why he had attempted suicide.

Rambert and Rieux have a disagreement about the reason people should help fight the plague—for the idea of heroism, for love, or for plain duty? Initially Rambert had refused to join the volunteers, but the morning after this conversation, he arrives ready to work.

Analysis

Rambert's fruitless attempts to arrange an escape—the endless meetings that he must arrange as he tries to leave the town—show the futility of trying to combat the effects of the plague. Just as Dr. Rieux continues to fight the plague, and Grand continues to try to improve his sentence, Rambert continues to pursue a goal that cannot be gained. These are all struggles that seem small in the face of the indifference of plague, war, and weather.

As much as struggling to attain the impossible may seem a heroic goal, however, Rambert says he doesn't buy the idea of being a hero. He does what he does for love, not for heroism. Heroism, he suggests, is an idea. Again Dr. Rieux takes issue with this "abstraction" argument. People are not abstractions, or ideas. Rambert counters by saying that when people lose the ability to love, they lose their meaning.

As Part 2 closes, Camus has presented readers with several responses to the plague. One is trying to make sense of the nonsensical, like Father Paneloux. One is habit—seeing the same movie over and over, for example. One is inaction—closing the windows, pulling the shades, and hiding inside. Another is duty—taking necessary action, doing one's job. One is imagination—like Tarrou's "sanitary squads." Readers should be careful not to assess these by their effectiveness; they are all equally ineffective. Instead, readers should look carefully at the qualities of the people making the choices, particularly the way they interact with others, for clues about the rightness of their responses.

Part 3, Chapter 18

Summary

It is the height of summer, the weather is still hot, and the plague continues in Oran. The people of the town are like prisoners, and though they really have a "collective destiny," some maintain their own personal illusion of free choice. The plague has moved from the outer areas of Oran to its center, prisoners in the town jail (and their guards) are dying, and martial law is declared. Attempts to escape the gates escalate. Criminal activity also escalates, including arson and looting. The government tries to impose law and order by instituting a

curfew.

Funerals become less ceremonial and more mundane; eventually there are so many dead bodies they are simply buried in mass graves. At first, the mass graves are separated by gender. Then, men and women are buried together. Cemeteries begin to fill up, and cremation is the only way to deal with the large numbers of the dead.

All of this has the effect of damping people's emotions. They miss their loved ones less and fear the plague less. They seem to be "sleepwalkers" without anything to set them apart from each other. They have lost both individuality and the capacity to love in the suffering.

Analysis

Part 3 explores the way that the plague erases divisions among people as they face their "collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all." The plague has moved from the outer, poorer areas of town to the center, wealthier areas. Prisoners in the jails die of plague, but so do their guards, "in the same proportion." The plague does not play favorites. Men and women die of plague, and after a while, so many are dead they are buried together in mass graves. Individual funeral rites, which in normal times provide a sense of closure for a life, are abandoned. The narrator calls the plague "despotic" in the way that it does not respect individual persons, reinforcing the allegorical nature of the novel.

The importance of imagination resurfaces in this chapter, as well. Those whose family and friends are somewhere outside the city are beginning to lose the ability to imagine what the absent ones might be doing. Their "imagination failed them" as they "lost the power of imagining the intimacy that once was theirs or understanding what it can be to live with someone whose life is wrapped up in yours." Without imagination, their very emotions become mundane clichés, such as wishing the plague would end. Without imagination, they talk about their absent loved ones, "using the same words as everybody else." This troubling lack of imagination recalls the narrator's previous distress that all communication going out of the city had been reduced to telegrams of 10 words or less. Speaking and feeling in clichés and stock phrases is seen as one of the ways the plague erases individuality.

Part 4, Chapter 19

Summary

Weeks pass and the people of Oran are becoming apathetic about the plague. Dr. Rieux is still treating patients, and Rambert's hotel is under quarantine. Hope has almost died in the town. It is certainly taking a toll on many of the novel's characters. Joseph Grand encourages himself by thinking about working on his novel or only the one sentence of the novel. Dr. Rieux worries that his wife is lonely without him. Tarrou is bored by everyone except Cottard, who is strangely cheerful now that fear of the plague is the only fear that matters, and everyone shares it. Dr. Castel tries his new, improved serum on M. Othon's young son. Everyone is tired.

Cottard and Tarrou visit the Opera House together for the opera *Orpheus*. In the midst of the performance, the actor playing Orpheus dies of the plague. Everyone panics.

Analysis

Tarrou, evidently bored by most of the people in town but intrigued by Cottard, spends time with the smuggler to try to better comprehend him (as Tarrou stated, his moral code is "comprehension"). Cottard is a fascinating case because for the first time, he feels like part of the community. He is no longer alone in a fearful existence, constantly worrying that at any moment he will be caught and his life taken; now all people are in a perpetual state of fear.

The fact that Tarrou and Cottard go to see *Orpheus* reflects the situation in Oran and the narrator's concern about "parted lovers." The opera is based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice from Greek mythology. In the myth, when Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies, Orpheus cannot bear to be parted from her, and so travels to the underworld to get her back. He is ultimately unsuccessful and returns to the world of the living, alone.

Part 4, Chapter 20

Summary

Rambert is still trying to escape Oran. Arrangements have been made, and his escape attempt is scheduled in two weeks. In the meantime, he works diligently as a volunteer and stays with Marcel and Louis. But just before the appointed time, Rambert cancels his escape. He tells Dr. Rieux that he once felt like a stranger and wanted to escape, but now that he's helping he feels as if he belongs.

Analysis

The narrator opens this chapter by saying "[t]here was nothing to do but to 'mark time,' and some hundreds of thousands of men and women went on doing this, through weeks that seemed interminable." This is reminiscent of the image of the asthmatic patient, who marks time by transferring peas from one pan to another. His habit of moving peas is really no different, Camus suggests, from the other habits that people engage in to fill their lives: all are ultimately devoid of meaning.

One question at the heart of *The Plague* is what separates people and what unites them. It also asks what kinds of separation and unification are good and which are harmful. As presented in Chapter 19, Cottard, who once felt isolated by his fear, now feels like he belongs, due to widespread fear. Rambert, who has felt separated from the community of Oran by his outsider status and his longing to leave ("Until now I always felt a stranger in this town") begins to feel like he belongs due to his work with the volunteer sanitary squads ("I know that I belong here whether I want it or not.")

Part 4, Chapter 21

Summary

Near the end of October, Dr. Castel's new anti-plague serum is ready to test. M. Othon's son is the first trial, and it is unsuccessful. Despite Father Paneloux's passionate prayer for mercy, the boy dies. Dr. Rieux points out that the child was innocent, so the idea that the plague is a punishment from God, as Father Paneloux preached, does not hold water. Father Paneloux speaks of love and grace, but Dr. Rieux isn't convinced of any larger significance to the plague. He admits that, although they disagree on many things, they are both working to alleviate the suffering of the plague.

Analysis

Since this is the first trial of the anti-plague serum, there are more witnesses than usual at Jacques Othon's death. What is more, they wait and watch as, minute by minute, the child suffers and dies; all the while, they are hoping for signs that the serum is starting to work. This particular attention causes them to tune in to the suffering and death more than they have in other cases of children dying, even though there have been plenty. A child dying of plague has become less of an abstraction and more concrete. The failure of the serum is a blow to those who are trying to fight the plague, and the image of Father Paneloux crying out "My God, spare this child!" over the dying cry of the boy is a powerful one for characters and readers alike.

Ultimately, the experience unites the witnesses even more strongly in their common cause to fight the plague. Having a common cause is perhaps more unifying than common suffering. As Paneloux tells Rieux: "We're working side by side for something that unites us—beyond blasphemy and prayers."

Part 4, Chapter 22

Summary

Father Paneloux has been working as part of Dr. Rieux's volunteers and has been "at the forefront of the fight" against the plague. He preaches another sermon—not as well-attended as the first, since the people of Oran are now crazy about old prophesies rather than the Church—about the nature of evil. He seems to suggest that good can come of the plague, even from the suffering of a child. He tells the people they either have faith in God or they do not. He uses the term "active fatalism" to describe the idea that people must accept that God has willed the suffering they endure, but they must also fight it. Suddenly, a strong wind blows the doors open, interrupting the sermon.

The opinion of other clergy of Paneloux's sermon (and the fact that he is consulting a doctor about matters) is that the priest seems uncertain of his faith, even conflicted. Thereafter,

Father Paneloux becomes ill and dies, but the symptoms do not resemble the plague symptoms at all. Dr. Rieux records that Father Paneloux's death was a "doubtful case."

Analysis

Father Paneloux's experience watching Jacques Othon die has had a profound effect on his faith. He decides that, for Christians, faith must be 100 percent—you have faith in God and accept the plague as part of His will or you reject faith altogether. In some ways, this seems similar to Dr. Rieux's opinion that he can either attend to his duty to fight the plague or to his own emotions, but not both. Neither have found a good middle way.

The final image of Dr. Rieux recording Father Paneloux's name and cause of death as "doubtful case" underscores Paneloux's spiritual crisis. On the surface, Dr. Rieux is simply recording that Father Paneloux had a "doubtful" case of plague, since his symptoms did not match plague symptoms. A second meaning is that father Paneloux died as a result of his inability to reconcile his experience and his faith; therefore, he had spiritual doubts about God's existence or God's goodness that he could not live with.

Part 4, Chapter 23

Summary

It's All Soul's Day, but no one wants to visit the graves of their loved ones because they "no longer wished to be reminded of their dead." The weather has become pleasantly autumn-like. People have taken to wearing waterproof clothing to keep away the plague, even though this is clearly just a way for stores to make a profit from people's fear of the plague.

The plague continues to kill people with the "punctual zeal of a good civil servant." Since the deaths are not increasing, Dr. Richard is pleased and thinks the worst may be over. He believes this may be in part due to Dr. Castel's serum, which has been effective in a few cases. Dr. Richard soon comes down with plague symptoms. To make matters worse, a new form of plague emerges—one that is more like pneumonia.

In his journal, Tarrou has recorded a visit to a quarantine camp. It is guarded like a prison, and each person has his own tent. Those in the camp are unsympathetic to each other and know they've been forgotten by those outside. They discover that M. Othon is the manager of the camp, and he asks about his son's death. Tarrou tells him, "No, I couldn't really say he suffered."

Analysis

The narrator makes a point of noting that, as the weather cools, it does so just as it usually does. "As in other years a cool wind blew all day." Should readers interpret this as *the seasons go on as usual, despite the disrupting influence of the plague,* or *like plague, and war, seasons come and go whether or not people are ready for them,* or some other interpretation? Recalling that the weather has at times mirrored the plague, sometimes it seemed to contrast the plague, sometimes it is predictable, and sometimes "unseasonable," perhaps Camus invites readers to remember that the weather is indifferent and is in no way connected to the plague, although it is similarly uncaring of the graph that encourages Dr. Richard so much before he dies.

As for the plague, now that it has been ongoing for seven months, deaths have reached a plateau, but that plateau is so high that the "balefires of the pestilence were blazing ever more merrily in the crematorium." It has passed the point of erasing boundaries among people, and has turned to doing the opposite. In the quarantine camps, people await death in individual tents, alone. Since food is becoming scarce, it has become expensive, and so the poor suffer more than the rich, "whereas plague by its impartial ministrations should have promoted equality among our townsfolk, it now had the opposite effect." Tarrou notices the way the plague is dividing people from one another and chalks it up to people being incapable of thinking about others, because that takes up one's whole attention. "Nobody is capable of really thinking about anyone ... For really to think about someone means thinking about that person every minute of the day, without letting one's thoughts be diverted by anything." Somehow this bears a similarity to the way that Dr. Rieux has to put his own feelings aside to focus on the plague and how Father Paneloux felt that he must have complete faith or no faith. Each character seems to grasp for his or her absolute—his own way of seeing the world in black and white.

Part 4, Chapter 24

Summary

The quarantine camps, with their smell and the sense of dread they inspire, lower morale among the citizens of Oran. People are anxious, and there are more incidents of "disturbing the peace." The weather has turned rainy. Tarrou and Dr. Rieux pay a visit to Dr. Rieux's asthmatic patient. The two speak with the old Spaniard, then go outside for a talk. Tarrou reveals that he's already had the "plague," and that overall he has had a good life. He also reveals that his father memorized train schedules, although he did not take the train. One day, he says, his father invited him to watch a court proceeding that he was involved in as a prosecuting attorney. During the trial, Tarrou had developed a sympathy for the defendant, even though he looked fairly guilty. But his father argued against the defendant, and the man was declared guilty and executed. Tarrou came to think of this as a murder, not as his father doing his job. Later he had seen a man killed by a firing squad. This was when he realized he actually had the "plague." He maintains that in life, there are many pestilences, but they must be fought against. His method is to act and speak simply, so as to avoid making the problem worse.

Tarrou believes there can be healers in the world, and he's trying to be one. If he were religious, a healer might be called a "saint." Dr. Rieux responds that he does not want to be a healer or saint, but just a man.

After this rather heavy discussion, the two go for a swim in the sea.

Analysis

Readers should recall that Tarrou told Dr. Rieux previously that he already knew everything. In this chapter, insight into this statement is revealed. Tarrou applies the term *plague* to something more than the disease they are currently fighting. In his description of his childhood, he observes that he has already had the "plague." He is part of a system that includes the death penalty, which he believes is murder. By taking part in an epidemic of state-sanctioned murder, he has already learned the lessons that plague has to teach. Camus was against the death penalty, so in this episode he is able to frame his own political opinions in the language of the plague. The idea that humans must continue to struggle against the various "plagues" that cause human suffering and death is a central idea in the novel.

As Tarrou explains his ideas about his personal plague, he delves into a subject that he touched on previously when he said that the asthmatic patient was a saint if saintliness was the accumulation of habits: how to become a saint, apart from the Church or religion. Like Dr. Rieux, he seeks to lead a good, meaningful life. But Tarrou seems more inclined to use the language of religion to express his goal. Tarrou wants to be a healer—an atheist saint. Dr. Rieux wants to be a human.

The sea figures prominently in many works by Camus, and though it is mostly just a presence in *The Plague*, here two men dive into its depths, both figuratively in their speech and literally when they go for a swim. Perhaps in its depths Tarrou finds the silence that he believes holds the truth.

Part 4, Chapter 25

Summary

The residents of Oran no longer think of the future. Morale is very low, but patients are a little more cooperative with the doctors. M. Othon writes to Dr. Rieux, asking if the doctor can verify that it is time for Othon to be released from the quarantine camp. But when Othon is released, he decides to go back to the camp, this time as a volunteer. It makes him feel closer to his son who died.

The narrator gives updates on some of the other characters: Rambert, who unsuccessfully tried to get out of the town, contents himself with exchanging letters with his wife. Cottard is happily profiting from his "business" ventures. Grand becomes ill with the plague and asks Dr. Rieux to destroy his manuscript (which is still only one sentence, written 50 times with slight variations). But, surprisingly, the next day Grand seems better. Then another patient recovers from the plague. The asthmatic patient remarks that rats have begun to appear again in Oran—live ones. And just like that, plague deaths begin to decline. The worst is over.

Analysis

This chapter draws parallels between Joseph Grand, Dr. Rieux, and Raymond Rambert. These men are all in relationships with women who are unavailable, and who can only be communicated with through letters. Rambert has little trouble writing these letters, and Grand has been unable to write a letter (as he comes down with the plague, he has managed to write eight words of a letter to her. "My dearest Jeanne, Today is Christmas Day and ..."). Dr. Rieux is somewhere in the middle—he does decide to write his wife a letter, and yet finds it "a laborious business, as if he were manipulating a language that he had forgotten."

The illness and sudden recovery of Grand mark the climax of the book. From here on, the death toll decreases.

Part 5, Chapter 26

Summary

People are still dying, but in far fewer numbers. It might be that the serum is working, or simply that the plague ran its course. Overall, people are more hopeful, although some have been so changed by the experience they can not hope anymore. On January 25, the government officials declare the plague officially on its way out. Tarrou notices a cat and is happy that the spitting man will have some cats to spit on again.

Analysis

The narrator likens the plague to an exhausted and exasperated athlete, who has suddenly lost all energy. He also says that the plague "declined more rapidly than we could reasonably have expected." Like something with a will of its own, unpredictably, the plague seems to be mostly over. Yet the narrator is careful to point out that nothing the people of Oran did seemed to defeat the plague. The plague serums, which have not worked, suddenly work. The measures they have been taking all this time finally seem to have an effect, through no fault of their own. "Really, however, it is doubtful if this could be called a victory. All that could be said was that the disease seemed to be leaving as unaccountably as it had come." To Camus, the struggle against the plague is the important thing, not the success of the fight.

Part 5, Chapter 27

Summary

Although the narrator notes that Tarrou's journal seems less objective than before, he still uses it as a reference. The journal reveals that with the plague on its way out, Cottard is worried that things will go back to the way were. He will again be worried about arrest. As Tarrou and Cottard discuss this, two men approach and ask for Cottard's name. Cottard runs off.

Analysis

Even though the spitting man has stopped turning up, Tarrou thinks about him. He wonders if the spitting man is a saint and decides that he might not be a saint, exactly, but his "mild, benevolent diabolism" was an "approximation" of sainthood. This may be the closest thing Tarrou gets to an answer to his question of sainthood.

The narrator observes that Tarrou's diary becomes less objective, and in it Tarrou claims to be tired, a condition that seems to be echoed in his statement that he is afraid of that "a certain hour of the day" when "man's courage is at its lowest." These changes in Tarrou are clues to the fact that he is coming down with plague; he will now face death first hand.

Part 5, Chapter 28

Summary

Tarrou comes down with plague symptoms, and Dr. Rieux does not want to quarantine him. In defiance of normal procedures, Dr. Rieux himself, assisted by his mother, keeps watch over Tarrou through the night, and in the morning Tarrou seems better. However, as is typical of plague patients, he quickly declines and dies after this last rally. Dr. Rieux feels defeated by this loss, as if he will never be at peace. He reflects on that nature of love, language, knowledge, and Tarrou's goal of saintliness.

The following day, Dr. Rieux finds out his wife has died. He considers how his suffering is the "self-same suffering" he has seen all these months. It has been going on forever and will continue.

Analysis

Tarrou's death is a contrast to the death of Father Paneloux, who succumbed to death without a struggle, essentially just giving up life because of his faith crisis. Tarrou, rather, intends to fight; if he loses, he at least wants to "make a good end of it." Tarrou's death also provides a look at his friendship with Dr. Rieux, who encourages Tarrou to live by telling him that the only way to be a saint is to live (in contrast to becoming a Christian saint, which can only happen after one is dead). Dr. Rieux has not been excited about Tarrou's quest for sainthood, and so this concession is an act of friendship. Dr. Rieux also shows his friendship with Tarrou by refusing to follow the normal procedures for treating plague (quarantine) and by telling him the truth about his chances.

Part 5, Chapter 29

Summary

February rolls around, and the town's gates are opened. People can come and go, and they do. The trains are full. People are celebrating. Rambert can finally see his wife, something he has been longing to do. But he has also been changed by his experience. When she arrives on the train, she is excited to see him, while he has conflicting feelings. The narrator reminds readers that even though some people are reunited with their loved ones, others have lost their loved ones permanently.

Amidst all the activity, Dr. Rieux goes for a walk. He ponders the nature of hope and the ways it leads to problems. Some hopes are in vain, and some people hope for a greater meaning or purpose yet end up disappointed.

Analysis

The narrator returns to the idea of the "parted lovers" as the action of the story winds down. There are two groups of "parted lovers" in Oran: those who are reunited and those who are not. Raymond Rambert is an example those who are reunited, and through his experience readers see the difficulties these pairs face. One person experienced the suffering of Oran through the plague and the other did not. Yet Rambert, like all those who are reunited, is already trying to put the whole experience behind him.

Dr. Rieux is the example of someone whose lover is lost (though it was not to plague). For this group, the end of the plague is a starting place for a new chapter of suffering. Dr. Rieux's lonely, thoughtful walk is juxtaposed in this chapter with the general atmosphere of celebration in the town. He concludes that those, like Rambert, who simply wanted human love have a chance of finding it and being satisfied. Those, like himself and Tarrou, who hope for something "more" may never find it.

Part 5, Chapter 30

Summary

Dr. Bernard Rieux confesses that he is the narrator, explaining that he talked to many different people during the plague and so had a broader view of events that allowed him to be objective.

Dr. Rieux visits Cottard's part of town and encounters policemen, who warn him about a man with a gun. Grand is also nearby and gets the same warning. They hear shots and see a man with a gun in the window of Cottard's home. A shot fired out of the window hits a passing dog, which dies, and Grand recognizes the shooter as Cottard. Cottard is arrested, and Grand and Rieux have a chat. Grand says he was finally able to write a letter to his wife and has made some more headway on his sentence.

Dr. Rieux then visits his asthmatic patient and goes outside onto the terrace, where he watches people celebrating. He thinks about those who died and decides to write down his experiences so that they will not be forgotten. He ends by reminding readers that plague, or things like plague, never go away forever.

Analysis

This chapter provides some closure to the stories of Grand and Cottard. Cottard cannot take part in the celebrations, because he attached himself to the thing that brought suffering to all his neighbors. His sense of belonging to a community was fleeting, because it was not founded on "comprehension" or doing one's duty, but on selfish ignorance. Grand, who Dr. Rieux called the "hero" of the story, heroically plunges back into attempts to write his book.

Dr. Rieux and his asthmatic patient find some common ground in this final chapter. The asthmatic man says that "plague" is just "life," suggesting that life is full of "plagues" or that, since life ultimately leads to death, life itself is just a plague that can take many years to become fatal. Dr. Rieux says much the same things as he discusses his reasons for writing his account of the plague. He says they did not win a final victory over the plague, but only did what needed to be done. The plague could return at any time, because plagues and the suffering they cause are inevitable.

“ Quotes

"Taking careful aim, the old man would spit vigorously at the cats and ... beam with delight."

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 1, Chapter 3

The man who spits on cats is a character who illustrates the absurd because his action has no greater meaning, yet he takes delight in it. When one is able to find joy in the moment, the meaningless of life is less painful.

"There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet [they] always ... take people equally by surprise."

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 1, Chapter 5

This line, which appears toward the beginning of the novel, foreshadows the end of the novel, when the narrator reveals his reason for writing is so people will not forget what happened. The inevitable surprise suggests a kind of collective denial in facing death.

"A hundred million corpses broadcast through history are no more than a puff of smoke in the imagination."

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 1, Chapter 5

The narrator explains why people, and especially the authorities of Oran, don't take the plague seriously for a long time. As long as they don't see the faces of the dead, they are not personally touched by their deaths.

"Orders! ... When what's needed is imagination."

— Jean Tarrou, Part 1, Chapter 8

Tarrou disdains the reaction of the government to the plague, saying that what is needed is imagination, not orders, to solve the problem. Tarrou's imaginative approach includes forming volunteer teams to fight the plague. His focus on using imagination, instead of simply experiencing the plague, is part of Camus's sense that more than one's present experience is significant.

"Content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky."

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 2, Chapter 9

As the narrator explains how people reacted to the suffering of the plague, he notes how they began to feel isolated from one another, despite the fact that they were enduring a similar problem. The suffering of the plague takes away something important from the people: the ability to step outside their present moment through thought, memory, and imagination.

> *"They seemed at the mercy of the sky's caprices—in other words, suffered and hoped irrationally."*

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 2, Chapter 9

The sky—the weather—weaves in and out of the story as a reminder of the indifference of the universe to human suffering. Nonetheless, the people continue to look to the weather for acknowledgement of their suffering, a meaningless act.

> *"A time came when I should have found the words to keep her with me—only I couldn't."*

— Joseph Grand, Part 2, Chapter 10

Grand, speaking of why his wife left him after years of marriage, expresses the difficulty he has with finding the right words—a difficulty that breeds isolation and continues to haunt him throughout the book. The inability to communicate through language translates into the inability to connect with humanity.

> *"No longer were they individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and ... [shared] emotions."*

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 3, Chapter 18

The idea that suffering and death are what all humans have in common is an important refrain in the book. This commonality defies imposed perceived differences such as race, class, or gender that people use to isolate themselves from one another.

> *"Nothing ... is worth turning one's back on what one loves ... that is what I'm doing."*

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 4, Chapter 20

Dr. Rieux says this in reply to a longer conversation with Rambert about having to choose between happiness with a loved one and working to fight the plague. Throughout the book, Dr. Rieux mulls over why he helps people. Readers don't get to find out what he decides until the final chapter of the book.

> *"What we learn in a time of pestilence ... there are more things to admire in men than to despise."*

— Dr. Bernard Rieux, Part 5, Chapter 30

This simple statement that there are more admirable than despicable things about men is a positive and hopeful closing message. It supports the theme that acting admirably in the face of inevitable suffering is a noble aspect of the human condition.

Symbols

Weather

The weather is a constant source of imagery in *The Plague*.

The seasons progress from spring to summer to fall, with both seasonable and unseasonable weather. Rain, wind, and hot, stifling weather all add to the atmosphere of Oran. No matter the weather, the people of Oran act as though it holds meaning, and in doing so, impose their own desire for meaning on this indifferent and unpredictable force. They imagine the hot weather reflects the heat of the plague's fevers or that wind will spread the plague. They are suspicious of weather that, in happier times, would mean a day at the beach. As much as humans want to find meaning in the weather, it is, like the universe, indifferent to the plague and to all human suffering.

Rats

The rats are the first sign of the plague's onset and a sign the plague is on its way out. At the beginning of the novel, their deaths foreshadow the human deaths that follow. The random assortment of dead rats that litters the town shows the plague strikes randomly, without regard for public or private space. Ignoring the rats, then taking ineffective measures against them, becomes a representation of the incompetence and denial that plague the town authorities. At the end of the novel, their return signals the end of the plague. In this way, the rats foretell the human condition rather than threaten it.

Plague

The plague comes to represent other sources of suffering and alienation. First and foremost, it is an allegory for the rise of Nazi Germany and the suffering that happened during World War II. The rise of the plague among a population unprepared for it is like the rise of fascism in Europe and the ineffective response to its dangers. The destruction and death caused by the plague is likened to the destruction of war. Lovers are parted, and even those who are reunited are changed forever. People finally band together to fight, but the struggle is an impossible one, affording a small victory but no "final" victory. Yet, Camus stresses the need for people to continue to fight (both plague and fascism), regardless of whether they can hope for victory.

Themes

Human Suffering

As the plague ravages the population, it becomes clear that suffering is universal and inevitable. The plague causes suffering among the rich and the poor, the old and the young, and men and women. No group is untouched.

The suffering has three effects. First, it demonstrates a way all the people in Oran are alike. They all live in fear; anyone could come down with the plague at any moment. Humans suffer, and their suffering makes them the same, erasing boundaries to the point where men and women together are buried in mass graves without ceremony.

The second effect, however, is the opposite. The plague isolates people, as they imagine that their particular brands of suffering are different from those around them and as they are separated into quarantine camps and even into individual tents in those camps.

The third effect is awareness. While the citizens of Oran suffer both before and after the plague as well as during it, the difference in the aftermath is that the citizens are aware of their suffering. Ultimately, they learn that suffering acts as a teacher, urging people to become their best selves by opposing suffering in favor of mankind.

Freedom

Before the plague, the people of Oran were free to come and go and to live, love, and work as they pleased. Despite this, they live as prisoners of habit, going through the motions of life without truly living or loving. Paradoxically having to face the fear and death the plague generates has the potential to release people, in some ways, from this habitual existence. Yet the attraction of habit and the tendency to sink back into denial of mortality constantly pull people back into the captivity of ignorance.

This state of perpetual captivity, despite the status of the plague, extends the concept of freedom from a physical condition to the realms of emotion, spirit, and intellect. Thus, real freedom survives as a state of mind, regardless of whether the city gates are open or closed.

Facing Death

In coming to terms with dying, people are finally able to experience life. Since death is part of human existence, to face death is to face a fundamental truth about being human. Just as Tarrou wants to be told, in complete honesty, what his chances for survival are, people must face the truth of their own mortality, or they will simply live as prisoners to their own denial. Once death has been accepted, a person can truly live life unfettered by fear. This may be why the elderly members of the population seem to be unchanged by the fear and suffering of the plague. They have accepted their mortality and no longer fear it.

The plague and the war imagery make the citizens of Oran conscious of death. This consciousness is empowering. With the possibility of death at the forefront of life, it becomes almost impossible to live passively. Death, too, like suffering, is a great equalizer among the citizens, who must choose to live while they are able.

Isolation and Language

Physical and emotional isolation play a role in *The Plague*. The plague cuts off physical communication with the rest of the world, leaving the town isolated. Within the town, people are further isolated into quarantine camps, into individual quarantine tents, and, at times, into their own homes.

But emotional isolation also affects the characters. For example, Cottard is isolated by his fear of arrest, and he only feels less isolated when the plague causes universal fear. Dr. Rieux is isolated by his need to set aside his emotions to focus on the work at hand. Both Rambert and Rieux have difficulty communicating with the women they love. Joseph Grand is isolated by his perpetual inability to find the "right" language, highlighting a larger issue regarding communication. Language is, by its nature, difficult to use, subjective, open to interpretation, and often meaningless. This inability of many of the characters to truly connect with each other through precise communication adds another layer of isolation to their experiences. A problem that cannot be named or adequately defined cannot be addressed in any meaningful way. So this failure of language isolates those who would confront the problem of the plague, making it that much more difficult to combat.

Suggested Reading

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