

ENG 568 - World War II in Literature: The Nobel Prize

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An Honest Account of Life Imitating Art in Albert Camus's *The Plague*

Reflecting on his account of the epidemic as he experienced it, Dr. Bernard Rieux ends by saying his goal in doing so was “to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise” (Camus 423). This quote by Dr. Rieux from Albert Camus's *The Plague* transcends time and space, that is, its resonance and impact transcend any specific time in history or geographical space. It also reflects Camus's own contemplative mood as a philosopher and thinker. **Unlike Winston Churchill or Günter Grass, fellow Nobel Prize in Literature laureates, Camus's writings in *The Plague* accurately represent his own uncertain feelings toward war. Both Churchill's and Grass's writings for which they won the Nobel Prize, express or reflect a bipartisan view of the war, which reflect (after the fact) popular belief—the Nazis were evil, that does not accord with their lives; take for instance Churchill's proud colonist view on the oftentimes brutal British occupation of India (Limaye BBC News). One could agree he only believed in “defending exalted human values” for the British people (Nobel prize in literature 1953 Nobel Foundation); Or Grass's secrecy of having served in the Nazi party, only revealing this many years later by which time he was already a public figure (*The Tin Drum* 1959).** These hypocritical stances taint and spoil their otherwise notable works. This is why Camus above Winston Churchill and Günter Grass most merited the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In Alfred Nobel's will, whose fame and fortune sponsor the Nobel Prize in Literature winners' monetary award and recognition, he stated “The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: /- – / one part to the person who shall have

produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction ...” (Alfred Nobel). The latter phrase—most outstanding work in an *ideal direction*—describe the qualifying quality of a winner of said prize. Ideally directed classic literature, worthy of canonical reservation, is a piece of writing that is universally influential for generations if not centuries. Take for instance Shakespeare’s plays. These pieces of literature have resonated with readers from diverse walks of life for decades because they represent universal aspects of the human condition that people century after century struggle with—what is love? What makes us humans? What makes a person moral and righteous? Etc. *The Plague* embodies this most ideal direction. It asks readers to contemplate what they would do if a plague like the one in *The Plague* broke out? What kind of person would they be? Would they be like Monsieur Cottard, a self-centered criminal who relishes the coming of the plague because he can make money smuggling people and goods in and out of Oran (Camus 196). Would they be like the selfless and jovial Jean Tarrou, who immediately after the plague had broken out in Oran, organized a team of volunteers to fight the plague (Camus 187). Or would readers be like the cynical and zealous Father Paneloux, who believes the plague is a punishment from God and only the citizens’ complete devotion and repentance can cure them of it (Camus 140).

Camus himself contemplated these questions many times in his life. Camus, who was born and raised in French occupied Algeria, knew political and social strife (Albert Camus Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). When Camus was less than a year old his father, who had been fighting in the Battle of the Marne in WWI against the Germans heading west, died (Albert Camus Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). When the Second World War broke out in 1940, Camus found himself trying to flee Paris where he was at the time but decided later to stay and contribute to the effort against the Germans by joining the French Resistance as the

editor-in-chief of the French newspaper *Combat* (Albert Camus Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Demonstrating his apprehension for total political affiliation and dislike of war and civil unrest, during the Algerian War of 1954–1962, Camus kept a neutral stance, even advocating for a diverse Algeria. This was a position that caused controversy and one that most parties rejected (Albert Camus Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Camus was able to maintain a neutral stance on political issues because he did not believe morals, and thereby beliefs, remain stagnate throughout life. He did not believe in only one way of thinking, being, serving, or political affiliation. Throughout his life he rejected many and/or any kind of totalitarianism or socialism. These beliefs align well with the idea that one must never ascribe to one form of being, rather one must always wonder how one would behave under extreme circumstances and why one would behave in such a way—themes well represented in *The Plague*. These, as aforementioned, are critical attributes of a work that is *ideally directed*, directed toward freedom of thought, stimulating of meditation, and transcending time and space. Take for instance *The Plague*'s relevance in the last two Covid years. Much like the plague in Camus's novel, the Covid pandemic of 2020 saw all kinds of characters with various motives come to the forefront. From politicians slow to react, to end-of-world religious fanatics, and journalist like Raymond Rambert in *The Plague* who report blindly, feeling no connection to the unrest before them initially then having a change of heart (Camus 285). And finally, everyday individuals like Joseph Grand who transformed during time of great upheaval to better more self-assured people (Camus 360-1). The Plague forces readers to ponder who in a time of plague and other catastrophic events like war.

Aside from its literal application to epidemics and pandemics, *The Plague*'s themes of duty, philosophical viewpoints, and mortality and suffering, make it a perfect allegory for war.

Published shortly after the end of WWII, it is certain that Camus was influenced by the devastation of the war. Like the plague present in the novel, war makes humans wonder duty, philosophical and political viewpoints, and most certainly their mortality and suffering. In this way the plague can be seen as a metaphor for war—their ability to cause destruction and a questioning of one's existence. In a more intrusive way, the plague can be compared to the Nazis who invaded the countries, homes, minds, bodies, and existence of their victims, they were “infectious agents”.

Indeed, Grass and Churchill having been victims of the Nazis' mind control (*Peeling the Onion* 2008) and invasion (*The Splendid and the Vile* 2020) respectively, were influential in their own ways, but not like Camus's work *The Plague*. *The Plague* deals with themes that exceed and extend well beyond the immediacy of a leader's self-benefiting inspiring speeches or a privileged man's self-pity and regret. Camus not only proclaimed war as adverse to humans, but his life also accurately reflected this belief. This is most admirable, ironic, and above all, honest because he favored the idea of uncertainty. Camus is quoted as saying, “It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning” (Albert Camus Quotes Goodreads). Camus stayed away from adopting any extreme meaning in life. Yet he never blindly followed a radical or exploitative political group like that of Nazism or colonialism. Camus managed to be on the right side of the issue of war, that is, freedom and inclusivity.

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