

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

01 October 2022

### Universal Themes:

#### Gabriela Mistral's "My Social Beliefs" and Albert Camus's *The Plague*

Throughout the Nazi occupation of France, Albert Camus argued that "Revolt comes from the heart" (Camus Bio The Albert Camus Society). For Camus and Gabriela Mistral, a literary peer and Nobel Prize laureate as well, revolt meant the rejection of absolutes. Both Camus and Mistral agreed that revolt, that is social engagement, is intrinsically based and not derived from an extrinsic system telling us what we should or should not believe. Although Mistral's and Camus's lives were situated in different geographical locations and gender classes, their works and lives—lyrical poetry of Chilean Latin American roots and French philosophical, allegorical prose—represent universal values of personal revolt.

In Alfred Nobel's will and testament the qualifier "ideal direction," alludes to literary work that is worthy of canonical reservation (Alfred Nobel). The Statutes of the Nobel Foundation state that a work must "be of such outstanding importance as is manifestly intended by the will" (The Noble Foundation). One could argue that these are pieces of writing that are influential and resonate with readers for decades because of their universal transcendence. Like Camus whose work in *The Plague* epitomized critical attributes of a work that is *ideally directed*, Gabriela Mistral's work encourages freedom of thought and stimulates the examination of one's convictions or values. This theme, of resistance to status quo, shapes the human experience and transcends time and space, while not explicitly or necessarily espousing a political party.

World War II showcased the dangers of blindly adapting one system or political party. It brought about the global realization that a political party like Hitler's Nazis—fueled by hatred,

bigotry, and violence—could come to incredible power. This realization influenced how writers wrote. Certainly, the Nazi's power made individuals like Mistral and Camus wary of embracing any particular (political) system wholeheartedly. In Mistral's "My Social Beliefs", she states "I have no political temperament" (230). In other words, her political views were not tied to any particular political party. She goes on to say,

My natural resistance to political extremism hasn't changed; on the contrary, I hold even more strongly to the old concept that the politics of the two absolutes, the ultra-traditionalist and the futurist, damage our Creole America from North to South and waste our time in a sort of equatorial fever or in a deadly apathy. (231)

Although women could not vote in Chile during WWII, Mistral clearly states here that she resists any extreme political views, even stating that political "absolutes" are damaging. Similarly, to represent a wide spectrum of beliefs and character types, Camus's *The Plague*, an allegory of war, contains characters with varying viewpoints, which increases the readers ability to freely examine their own values. Dr Rieux, unlike the Jesuit Father Paneloux, believes in human agency and humans' ability to take control thereby influencing their fate. Raymond Rambert, a journalist from France desires to escape the quarantine to return to his wife in France. Meanwhile, Jean Tarrou selflessly and courageously creates a group of volunteers with no reward for his actions. And finally, Joseph Grand, an aspiring novelist who can't seem to draft the first sentence of his novel, seeks perfection, while Cottard, his neighbor, gives up on life and tries to commit suicide. Each of these characters represented the spectrum of both intimate and sociopolitical convictions.

Mistral's poetry and prose favored the untethering of binary systems and instead talked about "having [to] abandon...everything [to] now...live free" (*The Happy Woman*). In fact, she

embodied nonbinary attributes, even rejecting femininity and masculinity. Binary systems such as whether a person was a citizen or non-citizen didn't exist in her beliefs. In "The Footprint," regarding the welcoming of European refugees into the Americas she says, "the Earth is round and God made it walkable for us just as he made the slithering fruit for the insect" (Mistral).

In *This America of Ours: The Letters of Gabriela Mistral and Victoria Ocampo*, Mistral yet again addresses her disdain for dualities, she says in a letter to Lady Votoya, a friend whom she traveled with to Cannes and to Nice in May and June 1939, "in order to resist the black mafia of the duo [Mussolini and Hitler] of bloody-minded devils—more the one from the South than the one from the North, as of yet" (Mistral, 92).

Mistral's disparagement of France accelerated during the war. She wrote to Ocampo of "rotten France." She was preoccupied by the gains of Fascism in Europe (Mistral, 20). Around this same time—1940, Camus found himself trying to flee Paris and avoid war; later at the insistence of colleagues, he decided 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*.

Instead of favoring any political extreme these authors focused on revolt—social engagement that dealt with universal themes like that of the influence of gender on individuals. Mistral, like Camus, was skilled in allegory, even alluding to truths or circumstances of which she could not explicitly name because she was a woman. In one of her most famous poems, "The Sleepless Woman" Mistral portrays women struggles with these lines

In one breath of mine he climbs  
and I suffer until he arrives—  
a mad cascade that his fate  
sometimes descends and others scales

and a crazy feverish thorn  
castanetting against my door

Here, the female narrator, presumably *the sleepless woman*, is tormented by the ghost of a man who keeps her up at night. In parallel, Camus also wrote about the unspoken, stigmatized struggles of his gender—i.e., suicide, pressures to succeed, and motivation, all exhibited by the characters mentioned above in *The Plague*. Both pieces showcase Camus's and Mistral's ability to address universal lived experiences during WWII.

For Mistral and Camus humans intrinsically know right from wrong without having to be told by a system or particular ideology. In “The Earth was not Walkable: comment on ‘The Footprint’” Mistral argues that “In the recent war, Europe forgot this ABC of morality; she ignored the first rights that derive simply from the adamite, just from being human accompanied resistance” (Mistral). Note that she attaches *resistance* to this natural human state. We see here again that revolt is the dominating theme in Gabriela Mistral’s writings. Likewise, in *The Plague* Camus places his characters (human beings) in adverse situations in which they must conceptualize revolt to metaphorically transcend their circumstances. So, Raymond Rambert (the journalist) had to revolt against his natural inclination for selfishness to transcend to altruism.

Mistral’s writings drafted from 1935 to 1951 and Camus’s novel *The Plague*, first drafted in 1941-1943 then revised in 1947, were and are pivotal and representative of the often-overlooked resistance toward extreme political views, namely Nazism, Communism, and Socialism, during the WWII era—a time when morally dubious men in power were vying for political and geographical dominance at the expense of human life. Despite being in different parts of the world when they wrote these and embodying different lived experiences, Mistral and Camus maintained that personal conviction through emotional and intellectual revolt or

resistance was the only cure in a time of chaos and absurdity. This view, free from fanaticism, exemplifies an ideal direction where individuals are not competing for one ideology at the cost of other ideologies or peoples' lives.

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