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## Is *The Plague* an Existential Novel?

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Idea of the Individual

5 May 2012

### Is *The Plague* an Existential Novel?

Existentialism refers to a broad range of philosophical beliefs and related cultural phenomena. While its origins can be traced to the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, existentialism as a unified movement only gained serious traction, especially among literary circles, by the close of World Wars I and II, as writers contemplated the sheer man-made destruction and loss of life of these two wars. Though often confused with nihilism and absurdism, existentialism is a distinct philosophical movement that presents man as fundamentally unknowable through science, logic, or morality. Albert Camus, a French Algerian “Pied-Noir” settler, epitomized the sudden turn toward literary existentialism, developing his own unique sense of the term. In *The Plague*, Camus uses a dehumanizing plague in Oran, Algeria to both accept several core existential and absurdist ideas while at the same time rejecting others in place of a belief in man’s fundamental goodness, or potential to do good.

Much of the force in *The Plague* comes from the callousness with which the narration views the plague itself as well as the lives of the men and women of Oran. Camus treats their mundane lives critically, remarking that "everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, 'doing business,'" (Camus 4) reflecting a cynical disdain for the pettiness and ultimate insignificance of Oran’s residents. Indeed, Camus goes so far as to erase the lines between each member of society, instead collectivizing them as a mass of existential inevitability: "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective

destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all" (Camus 167). Raymond Rambert, a visiting journalist from Paris, further reinforces the core existentialist idea that man cannot be understood purely through the lens of science. Rambert warns that "you can't understand. You're using the language of reason, not of the heart; you live in a world of abstractions," (Camus 87) responding to Rieux's perceived understanding of the world solely through a medical and scientific viewpoint.

However, *The Plague* also rejects several key existential tenets by emphasizing the good, or potential good, in every human being. By the end of the novel, Camus repudiates the inevitability of the universe through Tarrou's lengthy response to Rieux: "What's natural is the microbe. All the rest-health, integrity, purity (if you like)-is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention" (Camus 253). Tarrou's "good man" is able to overcome existential inevitability and perhaps even come to matter in the cosmic scheme of things, a clear rejection of existentialism. As the novel moves past its climax, and the sheer destruction wrought by the plague is revealed, Camus maintains that "what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise," (Camus 308) another rejection of existential indifference toward mankind. Albert Camus develops throughout *The Plague* a profound admiration for people that are able to act charitable and moral toward others in the face of something as incomprehensible and violent as the plague.

Thus, although *The Plague* might be said to be an existential novel at a very cursory level, Albert Camus manages to incorporate the central idea that man is good (or at least potentially good) as the novel progresses. In the face of the plague's destruction, many of the novel's characters choose to remain and fight the affliction, even despite the odds. Though the

underlying theme may be the disregard the universe and nature has for mankind, Camus has managed to weave the decidedly non-existential idea that perhaps man can do something to alter the course of nature, provided he is morally good.

Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. New York: Random House, 1991. Print.