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## The Spinning *Plague*

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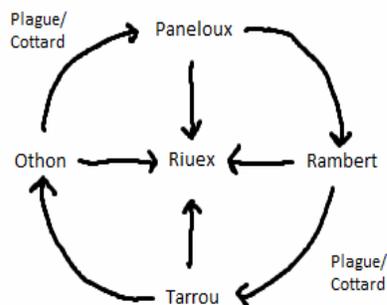
Mr. Kotlarczyk

Idea of an Individual

26 April 2012

### The Spinning Plague :

In her piece, “The Centripetal Structure of Camus’s *La Peste*,” Jennifer Waelti-Walters explains her idea that the narrative and plot of *The Plague* form a circular movement. There is a centripetal force that pulls all predominant characters and images to the center. Waelti-Walters determines that Rieux, the protagonist doctor, is this central figure. Though an apt analysis, her argument has a single flaw: her placement of Cottard within this circle does not accurately reflect his place in the novel. Though Waelti-Walters acknowledges Cottard as Rieux’s counterpart, she places Cottard next to other characters such as Tarrou, Rambert, and Othon, who have closer, more intimate relationships with Rieux. My model, which adds a new twist to her idea, still captures the core ideas of Waelti-Walters’ model while addressing Cottard’s misplacement by putting him outside of the circle entirely.



My redesigned model is based on the structure of a spinning top. In an otherwise peaceful village, the Algerian city of Oran would be static, the top lying still. However, the plague is thrust upon the city, bringing chaos that permeates every fabric of Oran’s society, initiating the spinning of the top and thus the circular movement within the novel. Naturally, with circular

velocity comes centripetal force directed towards the top's center. This force causes all of the characters to gather around Rieux. Without this driving force caused by the plague, none of these characters would have come into any close contact. As the characters are lured towards Rieux, he has a certain emotional influence on them that causes a shift in their beliefs, too. When the top falls over and comes to a sudden halt, so too does the plague as it abruptly leaves Oran. The centripetal force is gone, and the characters disperse in their separate directions.

When the centripetal force is present, Rieux's influence on the other major characters as they are brought closer together can be traced throughout the novel. Paneloux, for example, first appears as a radical religious figure, attributing the blame of the plague's coming to the people of Oran. He states that "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (Camus 94). He holds no doubt in his faith and belief of God. This faith begins to falter when the plague persists, and Paneloux sees deaths of an innocent child. After the death of Othon's son, Paneloux suggests to Rieux that "perhaps we should love what we cannot understand," convinced that even death is a medium of God's love (Camus 218). Rieux retorts, "No, Father...Until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture" (Camus 218). Rieux's retort in this pivotal scene leads to Paneloux's perspective wavering, making him the "doubtful case" (Camus 234).

Rambert, Othon, and Tarrou also share similar shifts in character. Rambert, who is initially presented as a selfish man solely focused on escaping Oran, becomes more sympathetic towards the divisions fighting the plague, and decides to stay to help Rieux. Othon, a once stolid man-the epitome of a judge- becomes more sympathetic and kind-hearted after his interactions with the plague and Rieux. Also, though Tarrou is Rieux's closest friend, he shows the most subtle change: perhaps the night before he dies, Tarrou is closure in his life, able to let go that he

had been an “innocent murderer” because he knew that he was the man responsible for fighting the plague in the first place.

Cottard is left out of this circle, because he is not affected by the plague in the same way as any of the other characters. *The Plague* is written in a desolate, nearly hopeless situation. Everyone is tired, worn out, and desperate for this mysterious disease to leave their city. In stark contrast, Cottard openly embraces the plague. Early in the novel, Tarrou notices that the plague seems to have recruited Cottard as an “accomplice” (Camus 81). Thus, Cottard is grouped with the plague outside the circle. He acts as the second catalyst to the plague, helping to subtly lower society’s hope and morale in the novel.

As a whole, Cottard’s attitude of openly embracing the plague helps to bring down the morale of Othon’s population. For example, when Tarrou attempts to recruit Cottard to join his sanitary squad, Cottard denies, replying that “the plague suits me quite well and I see no reason why I should bother trying to stop it” (Camus 158). In another instance, when Rieux and Tarrou marvel over a survivor of the plague, Cottard- without evidence- interjects that “That’s impossible [that the patient had the plague], since he recovered. You know once you have plague your number’s up” (Camus 157). Cottard continues, “The plague has the whip hand of you and there’s nothing to be done about it,” putting down Rieux and Tarrou’s hopes to somehow combat the plague (Camus 157). Even when people are optimistic about the return of the rats and the lowering mortality rates, Cottard tries to convince them that “there’s no knowing [that the plague is ending]. It may start again at any moment.” (Camus 278). Because everyone still had some uncertainty about the plague, Cottard’s negative remarks are “distressing to everyone else” (Camus 278).

In this way, my spinning top model addresses the misplacement of Cottard while still retaining Waelti-Walters' core ideas. My model focuses on Rieux and Cottard, two people who coincidentally are counterparts of one another in the novel. As the top is spinning, Rieux and Cottard are the two most separated characters, and serve opposite but equally critical roles to the text. Ironically, Cottard's death is concurrent with the plague's departure, as though his death marks the end of the plague as the top falls over to a halt.

Works Cited:

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.