

## REPRESENTATION OF DISEASE IN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF ALBERT CAMUS' *LA PESTE (THE PLAGUE)*

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**Received: 11 Jul 2021**

**Accepted: 14 Jul 2021**

**Published: 17 Jul 2021**

### ABSTRACT

*Over the centuries, European, American, French and African writers have been representing disease in literary works. But not all creative works featuring disease can be ranked as disease literature according to Disease Literary Theory promulgated by Ifeoma Onyemelukwe. This disease literary theory is used in combination with historical, descriptive and sociological methods to study representation of disease in literature. Albert Camus' *La peste (1947)/The Plague* is used as the study text. The main objective of the research is to examine thoroughly the way Camus represents disease in *La peste/The Plague* and establish if the novel meets or not the criteria to be classed as disease literature. It is found that Camus, in *La peste*, describes in great details the various stages of development of the plague in Oran, a coastal city of Algeria; its signs and symptoms, its prevalence, its negative and positive consequences, the preventive measures adopted by the government to check the spread of the disease like social distancing, isolation and complete lockdown. It is discovered that after roughly a year of quarantine of the city of Oran, the plague comes to an end. It is also established that the plague reflects the cholera epidemic that ravaged Oran in 1949 as well as past and present plagues/human suffering and pains like World War II and COVID-19. The study concludes that Camus' *La peste* qualifies to be classed as disease literature and is vividly relevant to the present-day world especially Nigeria stricken with corona virus pandemic among other "plagues.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Disease Literary*

### INTRODUCTION

This article examines critically the representation of disease in literature using the novel, *La peste (The Plague)* by the 20th Century French novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist and philosopher, Albert Camus, as the study text. The objective of the study is to analyse thoroughly Camus' representation of disease in *La peste/The Peste* and establish if the novel qualifies or not to be classified as disease literature. The study makes use of Disease Literary Theory promulgated by Ifeoma Onyemelukwe as well as the historical, descriptive and sociological methods. The research seeks to answer such research questions as:

- From the way Camus represents disease in *La peste*, can this novel truly qualify to be classified as disease literature?
- What steps does Camus take to reflect the plague in his novel, *La peste*?
- What causative factors are responsible for the plague?

- What are the major character traits of the plague, its signs and symptoms?
- What are the effects of the plague?
- Which plague in real life does the one in the study text seem to represent?

The research has the following objectives:

- To establish if *La peste* meets or not the criteria for evaluating and classifying a literary work as disease literature.
- To describe succinctly the stages of development of the plague in the study text.
- To identify the causative factors responsible for the plague.
- To describe the main character traits of the plague, its signs and symptoms.
- To bring out the impact of the plague.
- To identify the plague that occurred in real life which the one in *La peste* seems to reflect.

An appropriate starting point is an attempt at definition of key terms. What follows is the theoretical framework, followed by a brief survey of plagues in the history of the world. A review of representation of disease in literature comes next, then a brief presentation of Camus' life and literary career. Analysis follows: methodical representation of the plague, causative factors, signs and symptoms of the plague, prevalence, impact of the plague, real life plague reflected, strategies for checking the spread of the plague and rating of the novel as disease literature before concluding.

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### Disease

Disease means illness. According to *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, it is a disorder of structure or function in a human, animal or plant, especially one that produces specific symptoms or that affects a specific part. It is also a disposition that affects negatively an individual or group, for example, the British disease of self-depreciation. It insinuates inconvenience or lack of ease. *Britannica* defines disease as: "Any harmful deviation from the normal structural or functional state of an organism, generally associated with certain signs and symptoms and differing in nature from physical injury" ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)). The exhibition of signs or symptoms is indicative of the abnormal state of the organism. Disease is also defined as: "A disordered or incorrectly functioning organ, part, structure, or system of the body resulting from the effect of genetic or developmental errors, infection, poisons, nutritional deficiency or imbalance, toxicity, or unfavourable environmental factors" ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). Other words for disease include: illness, infirmity, sickness, ailment, and malady ([Meriam.webster.com](http://Meriam.webster.com)). Disease refers to a dysfunction from the normal whether physical, emotional, mental, psychological or physiological.

There are communicable diseases or infectious diseases (e.g., cough, tuberculosis, COVIDI-19) and non-communicable or chronic diseases like cancer, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases such as heart attack, stroke, chronic respiratory diseases (e.g. asthma) and diabetes mellitus. One can talk of nutritional diseases, blood disease, eye, ear and nose diseases and mental disorders. Disease can also refer to an outbreak, an endemic disease, a plague, an epidemic or a pandemic.

### Outbreak

An outbreak refers to a sudden rise in the number of cases of a disease in a community or geographical area. It may affect several countries and can last for a few days or weeks or several years (apic.org).

Certain outbreaks, like influenza, are expected to occur every year. Sometimes a single case of an infectious disease constitutes an outbreak particularly where the disease is a rare one (e.g. food-borne botulism) or one that has serious public health implications like bioterrorism agent (anthrax).

### Endemic Disease

An endemic disease is a disease which keeps recurring among specific people or in a certain area. In the tropical region, malaria is an endemic disease. Leprosy and Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) are now treated as endemic diseases in some parts of the world.

### Plague

According to *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, a plague is a contagious bacterial disease characterized by fever and delirium and sometimes infection of the lungs. It refers also to an unusually large number of insects or animals infesting and causing damage to a place e.g. a plague of locusts or rats.

### Epidemic

An epidemic occurs when an infectious disease spreads rapidly across many individuals and groups. In 2003, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic ravaged the world claiming many lives.

### Pandemic

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. It differs from an outbreak or epidemic in that it:

- Affects a wider geographical area and is often worldwide.
- Is often caused by a new virus or a strain of virus which has not circulated among people for a long time. Human beings usually have little or no immunity against it. Thus, the virus spreads like wildfire from person to person, all over the world.
- Causes much higher death toll than an epidemic.
- Often generates social disruption, severe economic loss and general hardship. The present incidence of pandemic (COVID-19) is a classic example.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Disease Literary Theory

Just as the feminist or masculinist critic examines a literary work from a gender conscious perspective, the Marxist critic, in light of class distinctions and modes of production, the eco-critic, via the lens of a nature-centred approach, the flipside critic, through the flipside literary theory, some literary critics analyse literary texts from the background of literary representations of disease. Such critics, in the context of this work, will be called "disease literary critics," while the new literary theory goes by the name: "Diseaseliterary theory."

Simply put, “disease literary theory” is the critical theory that presupposes the existence of a good number of literary works which can rightly be classed as “disease literature.” A work in this category has at least one form of disease represented in it among other criteria satisfied by it.

### **Criteria for Evaluating and Classifying a Literary Work as Disease Literature**

For a literary work to qualify to be classed as disease literature, it must satisfy the following criteria. At least, one disease must be represented in it apart from its containing:

- Causative factors of the disease
- Signs and symptoms of the disease
- Prevalence of the disease
- Impact of the disease
- Resolution/Nonresolution of the disease.

It goes without saying that not all literary works, which have one disease or another presented in them, can qualify to be categorized as disease literature.

## **BRIEF SURVEY OF PLAGUES IN WORLD HISTORY**

Outbreaks of plagues, epidemics and pandemics have occurred repeatedly in history with great havocs to humanity. History has a record of over twenty (20) of such pandemics dating from prehistoric to modern times (Janus 2020):

### **1. Prehistoric Epidemic: Circa (3000BC)**

Roughly 5000 years ago, a prehistoric village in China was wiped out by an epidemic. Archaeological and anthropological study revealed that no age range was spared. The dead bodies were packed inside a house that was later burnt down. The archeological site is presently called “Hamin Mangha” and is one of the best-preserved prehistoric sites in North-eastern China. Another prehistoric mass burial, dating roughly the same time, was earlier found at a site called Miaozigou in Northeastern China. These are indicators that an epidemic destroyed the whole region ([www://livescience.com/worst-epidemics](http://www://livescience.com/worst-epidemics)).

Notice, some epidemics are malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, influenza and small pox. Leprosy grew into a pandemic in Europe in the Middle Ages.

### **2. The Plague of Athens (430 BC)**

The earliest recorded pandemic took place during the Peloponnesian War. The disease spread through Libya, Ethiopia and Egypt and crossed the Athenian Walls as the Spartans laid siege. About two-thirds of the population died. The symptoms of this pandemic included fever, thirst, bloody throat and tongue; violent heats in the head, redness and inflammation of the eyes, red skin and lesions. The disease, suspected to have been typhoid fever and Ebola, weakened the Athenians in a significant way leading to their defeat by the Spartans ([www://livescience.com/worst-epidemics](http://www://livescience.com/worst-epidemics)).

### **3. Antonine Plague (165-180A.D)**

The Antonine Plague was probably an earlier appearance of small pox that started with the Huns. The Huns infected the Germans, who infected the Romans and the returning troops and ended up spreading it throughout the Roman Empire. The symptoms included fever, sore throat, and diarrhoea and if the patient lived long enough, pus filled sores. This plague killed over 5million people in the Roman Empire including Emperor Marcus Aurelius ([www://history.com/middle ages](http://www://history.com/middle%20ages); [www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www://livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

### **4. Cyprian Plague (250-271A.D.)**

The Cyprian Plague, named after St. Cyprian, a bishop of Carthage and its first victim, who described the epidemic as indicative of the end of the world, killed about 5000 people a day in Rome alone. Once again archaeological discoveries point to mass burial of the dead victims of this plague. Its symptoms included: diarrhoea, vomiting, throat ulcers, fever and gangrenous hands and feet ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www://livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

### **5. Justinian Plague (541-542A.D)**

Named after its victim who survived, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (who reigned from 527-565AD), Justinian Plague ravaged the Byzantine Empire. Its recurrences over the next two centuries eliminated 50million people, i.e. 26 percent of the world population. It is believed to be the first significant appearance of the bubonic plague. Its symptoms included enlarged lymphatic gland and was carried by rats and transmitted by fleas ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www://livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

### **6. 11th Century Leprosy**

Although leprosy had been occurring for ages, it grew into a pandemic in Europe in the Middle Ages. This gave rise to the setting up of numerous leprosy-focused hospitals to accommodate the significantly increased number of victims.

### **7. The Black Death (1346-1353A.D)**

The Black Death which was the second largest outbreak of the bubonic plague started in Asia and moved west to Europe and entered Caravans with devastating impact. It claimed one third of the world population. It was caused by a strain of the bacteria *Yersinia pestis* supposedly extinct today. It was transmitted from person to person by fleas on infected rodents. The bodies of its dead victims were buried in mass graves ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www://livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

### **8. The Cocoliztli Epidemic (1545-1548)**

This epidemic claimed the lives of 15million inhabitants of Mexico and Central America. "Cocoliztli" is the Aztec word for "pest." It was caused by a subspecies of *Salmonella* which causes enteric fever including Typhoid. Among the symptoms of this epidemic were high fever, dehydration and gastrointestinal problems.

### **9. American Plagues (16<sup>th</sup> Century)**

These comprised a cluster of Eurasian diseases which European explorers brought to the Americas. These illnesses included small pox. They claimed the lives of 90% of the indigenous population in the Western Hemisphere.

### **10. The Great Plague of London (1665-1666)**

The bubonic plague that started in April 1665 spread at a fast rate through the hot summer months. Transmission was principally by fleas from plague-infected rodents. The plague decimated 100,000 people, including 15% of London

population. Victims of this plague were buried in mass graves. Hundreds of thousands of cats and dogs, suspected as the cause, were killed.

### **11. The Great Plague of Marseille (1720 – 1723)**

The account from historical records showed that the Great Plague of Marseille commenced with the docking of a ship – Grand-Saint-Antoine in Marseille in France; a ship carrying cargo goods from the Eastern Mediterranean. Despite the fact that the ship was quarantined, plague still spread into the city probably through fleas on plague-infected rodents. Within three years, the plague killed 100,000 people in Marseille and the surrounding areas ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www.livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

12. Many more epidemics and pandemics were recorded in history such as First Cholera Pandemic (1817), Oran cholera epidemic (1849); the Third plague pandemic (1855), Fiji Measles Pandemic (1875), Russian Flu Pandemic (1889-1890); American Polio Epidemic (1916) and Spanish flu (1918-1920). The Spanish Flu occurred in Europe, USA and parts of Asia. A rough estimate of 500 million people fell victim to Spanish Flu and one-fifth of them died. Some indigenous communities were almost wiped out. The cramped conditions of soldiers and poor wartime nutrition experienced by many during World War I accentuated the spread of this pandemic ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www.livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

### **13. The Asian Flu (1957-1958)**

This avian virus-borne flu that originated from China resulted in 1.1 million deaths worldwide, with 116,000 deaths recorded in USA.

### **14. HIV/AIDS Pandemic (1981-date)**

AIDS has killed roughly 35 million people since it was first identified ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemics](http://www.livescience.com/worstepidemics)).

### **15. SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)**

This was believed to have started with bats, spread to cats and the humans in China followed by 26 other countries infecting 8,096 people with 774 deaths. The symptoms of SARS included respiratory problems, dry cough, fever and body aches. It was spread through respiratory droplets from coughs and sneezes. Quarantine efforts were effective and by July, the virus was contained and has not reappeared since China was accused of trying to suppress information about the virus at the beginning of the outbreak.

This survey on *World pandemics in history* cannot be rounded off without mentioning H1N1 Swine Flu pandemic (2009-2010), West African Ebola epidemic (2014-2016), Zika Virus epidemic (2015-present day) and the present-day COVID-19 Pandemic which started in Wuhan, China and spread to most parts of the globe, causing great human and economic losses ([www://livescience.com/worstepidemic](http://www.livescience.com/worstepidemic)).

## **REVIEW OF REPRESENTATION OF DISEASE IN LITERATURE**

The practice of representing disease in literature has been there since time immemorial. Take, for example, the theme of madness in literature could be seen with works of Homer, Cervantes and Shakespeare (Kravitz 1). It was common in 19th Century English and American Literatures when creative writers treated mental illness with interest and sometime with admiration as in Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy" (<http://www.enotes.com/topics/madness-nineteenth-century-literature>).

## REPRESENTATION OF DISEASE IN EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

People in the world present with different kinds of diseases apart from madness. Creative writers have continued to take interest in representing, in their fictional works, diseases of all kinds and magnitudes. Kravitz, in his book *Representations of illness in Literature and Film*, examined in details representations of illness in literary and paraliterary works: anorexia and bulimia in Jonathan Rosen's *Eve's Apple*, schizophrenic and loss of short-term memory in the films *Flight Club* and *Memento*, HIV/AIDS in Pearl Cleage's novel, *What looks like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, erectile dysfunction and the more debilitating disease suffered by the elderly of the 21st Century: dementia and its subcategory Alzheimer's in John Bayley's *My Father's Brain* and *Iris* (7-103).

## REPRESENTATION OF DISEASE IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Representing illness in literature is not the exclusive reserve of European and American creative artists, French writers and even African writers, among others, are steeped in this practice. Take, for example, in Anglophone African literature, disease of the nerve is represented in *Nervous Condition* by the Zimbabwean novelist, playwright and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga, post-traumatic stress disorders in Bright Molande's *Seasons* (poems), malaria in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kwashiorkor and Marasmus in Ifeoma Onyemelukwe's *Beyond the Boiling Point*. Furthermore, the theme of madness features in Wole Soyinka's *Madness and Specialist*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savanna*, Nawaal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

It is pertinent to note that, as I had observed in an earlier study, madness or mental illness recurs more frequently in Francophone African Literature than in Anglophone African Literature and is treated with more acute description in the former than in the later (Onyemelukwe, *The Theme* 32). Mental diseases like perception disorder, paranoia, dementia, delirium and amnesia are depicted in some Francophone African Literary Works, for example, Sembène Ousmane's *Le mandat* and Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*. The frequency of madness and madness associated illness is such that the word madness is incorporated into the titles of some creative works in postcolonial African Literature of French Expression as in: Mongo Beti's *L'histoire du fou*, Florent Couao-Zotti's *L'homme dit fou et la mauvaise foi des hommes*, Koffi Kwahule's *Village fou ou les déconards*, Axel Gauvin's *Train fou* and Ken Bugul's *Le baobab fou* and *La folie et la mort* (Onyemelukwe, *The Theme* 3-4).

In a somewhat similar way as Kravitz studied the representation of illness in European Literature and paraliterature, Ifeoma Onyemelukwe studied the theme of madness in selected francophone African Literary works using categories of psychiatric disorders proposed by Judge *et al.* (463-464) as the conceptual frame of reference. Eight postcolonial Francophone novels constituted the corpus viz: Sembène Ousmane's *Le mandat* (1966), Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979) and *Un chant écarlate* (1981), Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* (1982), Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* (1998), Caroline Angèle Yaou's *Nafiassou* (1998) and Sony LabouTansi's *La vie et demie* (1979) and *L'Etat honteux* (1981).

The study demonstrated that madness is one of the characteristics of postcolonial African Literature. It established six types of madness in postcolonial African Literature viz: Madness Type I (short-term madness, characterised by mild perception and affective disorders); Madness Type II (Long-term implicit madness characterised by mild affective disorders and a more serious perception disorder); Madness Type III (long-term explicit madness with psychopathic and destructive tendencies, characterised by severe perception, cognitive and affective disorders); Madness Type IV (long-term explicit madness with destructive tendencies); Madness Type V (long-term explicit madness with destructive tendencies) and Madness Type VI (long-term explicit madness with psychotic symptoms) (Onyemelukwe, *The Theme* 86-88).

Onyemelukwe established the causes, character traits (signs and symptoms) and significance of each category of madness, establishing among others, that about two decades after independence (1979-1981), the African leader has gone mad. He suffers from megalomania (exaggerated belief in his importance and power) and psychopathy i.e. illness linked to madness. He is prone to excessive show of dictatorial power and tends to perpetrate violence in all its forms. The protagonist of Tansi's *La vie et demie* and *L'Etathonteux* are classic examples of fictional African dictators. Blandford & Jones, in *The World's Most Evil Men*, give portraits of real-life dictators in Africa like Idi Amin of Uganda and "Emperor" Bokassa of Central African Republic (10, 23). Present-day Africa may not have been rid of such blood-thirsty dictators prone to bloody and heinous massacres, because of their mental illness of megalomania and psychopathy. She also established that 40 years after the independence of African countries, madness has crept into all areas of life in the African societies. Several leaders and their subjects have lost their minds. What is found is a lawless society characterised by subversion not only at the level of politics but in all facets of life. It is a lawless society where money is worshipped and considered central while all laudable moral values are thrown overboard what with the frantic craze for acquisitive propensity and blind love for money. Such societies depicted in the corpus (Senegalese, Ivorian, Congolese, for example) are reflective of other societies in emergent African states including Nigerian societies (Onyemelukwe, *The Theme* 90; Onyemelukwe, *Heroism*78).

Onyemelukwe's findings led her to conclude that the madness prevalent in such societies is translated into gruesome inhuman practices perpetuated in them: killing, bloody massacres for religious or political reasons, eating of human flesh, kidnapping, human trafficking, sale of human parts, ritual killing, rape, incest, forced child prostitution, nudity, pornography, homosexuality, pederasty, inordinate pursuit of money for which reason some people trade with their mothers, wives and children and sell their souls to the devil (*The Theme* 90; *Heroism* 78).

It is necessary to point out here that madness is only one out of a host of diseases depicted in Francophone African Literature. In *Littérature et maladie en Afrique: image et fonction de la maladie dans la production littéraire*, Jacqueline Bardolph examined critically a number of diseases represented in African literary works including mental illness. In Sembène Ousmane's *Xala*, all sorts of diseases are reflected aside the mysterious disease *xala* (sexual impotence or erectile dysfunction) hoisted on the protagonist El Hadj Abdou Kader Bèye. Infirmities like leprosy, blindness, lameness, deafness, paraplegia and paralysis predominate. Representation of diseases takes a somewhat similar pattern in Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des battù* except for the absence of *xala* or erectile dysfunction. Lynn Mbuko presents Vasico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) in her playlet *Chaque chose en son temps*. This is an unfortunate and deplorable condition emanating from early forced marriage. It is a form of violence on young girls and the playwright does not hesitate to condemn early/forced marriage, its causative factor.

Wound is presented in Jean Pliya's *Les tressseurs du corde* and in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*. Post-traumatic trauma and HIV/AIDS are depicted in Véronique Tadjo's *L'ombred'Imana: voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*, the latter as a than atological agent and source of unhappiness and misery. It is obvious that a war situation, genocidal war at that (where the Tutsis are pursued, raped, killed and massacred by soldiers and Hutus), favours the spread of the pandemic HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. This is the lot of the woman whose child was killed by a Hutu and raped by soldiers who abandoned her on the roadside. She regains consciousness and returns home but is already infected by HIV/AIDS. The same neighbour who killed her son comes to give her healthcare. In the process both fall in love and she ends marrying the same man that killed her son but who, like her, is HIV positive. Ifeoma

Onyemelukwe, in her critical analysis of thanatology in *L'ombred'Imana: voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda* categorizes this as 6th type of death as "la mort qui engendrel'amour" (death which engenders love) ("La thanatology" 712). Adelaide Fasino also represents HIV/AIDS in *Modupe: le rêve brisé* and *Toute une vie ne suffirait pas d'en parler*. Finally, Alain Mabanckou depicts STD and schizophrenia in *Petit Piment*.

## REPRESENTATION OF DISEASE IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Mental illness and other forms of diseases have been represented in diverse ways in French Literature. It is necessary to stress here that madness, apart from signifying a serious mental illness, can also mean "crazy or stupid behaviour that could be dangerous" (Hornby). A mad person is crazy, stupid, silly. He has lost his senses or he is out of his mind. His mind is not working normally. Take, for example, a mad person may be fanatical about a thing, have an obsession or excessive passion for something. Such an individual is referred to as a monomaniac. In other words, the individual has a singular passion for a thing, e.g. money or love be it paternal, maternal or erotic love.

This explanation helps one understand the representation of madness in Honoré Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*. There, Father Goriot is depicted as a monomaniac; a father with excessive paternal love; he is head over heels in love with his daughters. This blinds him and gradually brings him to his doom and death. This reminds one of Romeo and Juliette's excessive erotic love for each other in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette*. Father Grandet in Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet* is excessively in love with money. He admires his money, loves to accumulate it but not spend it. He is miserly towards his wife and only child (a daughter) and to himself. He even economises his movements, his steps. This is madness. Molière's protagonist in *L'avare* is equally out of his mind. Other illnesses represented in French literary texts include: Wound in Frederic Chouraki's *La plaie*, plague in Jack London's *La peste écarlate* and Stephen King's *Le fleau*, breast cancer in Lorraine Fouchet's *La mélodie des jours*, leukemia in Jodi Picoli's *Ma vie pour la tienne*, HIV/AIDS in Charlotte Valandery's *Du Coeur inconnu* and blindness in José Saramago's *L'aveuglement*.

A site offers for free reading 51 books which treated the theme of disease in French Literature. The first on the list is *La peste* by the 20th Century French writer of international repute; the father of absurd literature (<https://booknode.com/theme-multi/maladie-littérature-française-t2-210-1591>). On the list are also: Jean Giono's *Le Hussard sur le toit*, a historical novel treating an epidemic; Cyril Massarotto's *Le premier oublié* in which the Alzheimer's disease is represented; Valentine Goby's *Un paquebot dans les arbres*, which presents the disease of Tuberculosis; Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's *La quarantaine* which treats an illness and Olivia Rosenthal's *On n'est pas là pour disparaître*, which also treats Alzheimer's diseases.

## BRIEF PRESENTATION OF CAMUS' LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER

Albert Camus, who was born on 7th November 1913 in Mondovi in Algeria to a French Algerian (pied noir) settler family and who died on 4th January 1960 near Sens in France, was a French philosopher and writer decorated with the Nobel Prize for Literature at the age of 44 in 1957, the second youngest recipient in history. Camus is known all over the world as father of the absurd and a leading figure in the theatre of the absurd.

In the 1930s, Camus widened his interests by reading French classics and writers of the day including André Gide, Henry de Montherlant, André Malraux. He was among the famous young left-wing intellectuals of Algiers and a member of the Algerian Communist Party. He devoted time to producing and acting workers' Theatre. His love for theatre never

wavered even though his plays are, ironically, the least admired of his literary production. That notwithstanding, *Le Malentendu* (Cross Purposes 1944) and *Caligula* (1949) stand out in the theatre of the absurd.

Camus' influence as a journalist was felt most during the final years of the occupation of France and the immediate post-liberation period. Notable among the literary works of this literary icon of international repute are: *L'étranger* (U.S. title, *The Stranger*, British title, *The Outsider*), a successful debut novel published in 1942; *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (1942, *The Myth of Sisyphus*), a philosophical essay in which Camus analysed contemporary nihilism and a sense of the "absurd," though with considerable sympathy; *La peste* (1947, *The Plague*), his second novel and a symbolical account of the fight against an epidemic in Oran by characters known for their determined maintenance of human dignity and fraternity. Camus seemed to have moved from his first main concept of the absurd to his other principal idea of moral and metaphysical 'rebellion.' *L'homme révolté* (1951: *The Rebel*), Camus' second long essay triggered off bitter antagonism among Marxist critics and theoreticians like Jean-Paul Sartre. *La Chute* (1956, *The Fall*) shows Camus' concern with Christian symbolism. It is "an ironical and witty exposure of the more complacent forms of secular humanist morality" ([https://www.britanica.com/biography/Albert Camus](https://www.britanica.com/biography/Albert-Camus)).

Another major literary production of Camus is *L'exil et le royaume* (1957; *Exile and the Kingdom*), a collection of short stories. He died in a car accident in 1960.

After the Second World War, Camus, the novelist, playwright, moralist, humanist and political theorist, became the mouthpiece of his own generation and mentor of the generations to come not only in France but also in Europe and other parts of the globe. Camus and Sartre stood out as promoters of the existentialist novel. Camus defends in his works such values as truth, moderation and justice. His last works show him as a liberal humanist rejecting the dogmatic aspects of Christianity and Marxism.

Camus was influenced by Kierkegaard, who after Augustine, was perhaps the single greatest Christian influence on his thought. He also was influenced by the writings of Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, an influence that placed him on his own path of defiant pessimism and atheism. He was notably influenced also by Fyodor Dostoevsky and Simone de Beauvoir ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com), [www.biblio.com](http://www.biblio.com)).

## ANALYSIS

### Methodical Representation of the Plague

The novel introduces the catastrophic phenomenon with the death of a single rat. Dr. Bernard Rieux, on leaving his office, stumbles on a dead rat "au milieu du palier" (14) (in the middle of the floor). Dr. Rieux and the old Mr. Michel, the caretaker, are profoundly astonished.

Another rat at the point of death is again seen by Rieux when attention is at his wife, sick for about a year, and who is billed to travel by rail to the mountain. On 17th April, the caretaker reports to the doctor who is passing, that three dead rats have been deposited in the middle of the compound. The fourth time rat is mentioned in the novel, the dead rats have increased to a dozen.

As Rieux is treating his first patient for the day, he is asking him if he has seen the rats. His wife adds that their neighbour has collected three of them. The old patient explains that it is hunger that is chasing out so many rats from all the garbage bins. The discussion in the whole quarters is on rats. It is still not clear to the public and to the doctor that the town

Oran is under the attack of a plague. Already the town is plagued by rats, from one rat the number has greatly multiplied to fifty etc. Then inhabitants accuse the government of not acting fast enough. The authorities set up service for purging the city of rats. Dead rats are collected daily and cremated in incinerators.

From the fourth day, rats begin to come out and die in groups. According to the narrator, one could hear distinctly their cries of agony (21). The situation aggravates to the point that 6,231 rats are collected and burnt in one single day of 25th April and by 28th April, about 8,000 rats. People are at a loss concerning the magnitude and genesis of this ugly phenomenon. Soon Oran is seized by an epidemic, the disease is transmitted from one person to another, spreading panic and horror everywhere in the city.

The caretaker is attacked by the plague. Father Paneloux suggests to Dr. Rieux: "Ce doit être une épidémie" (22) (It must be an epidemic). A number of people are now victims of the plague. The rats have succeeded in transmitting the plague from human to human. Among the victims are Joseph Grand (about 50 years old), Mr. Michel, the caretaker, Mr. Othon's little boy and a host of others. People are dying in large numbers: 16 dead, 24, 28 and 32 (63). Burials are done indiscriminately (62). At the height of the plague, 500 people are dying in a week.

Rieux with the help of some people are working tirelessly to save the sick and contain the plague. Camus paints vividly, in the novel, the helplessness of humans to affect destinies in the face of the plague, which ends up destroying half of the population of Oran.

The novelist goes on to describe vividly the signs and symptoms of this plague, the causative factors, strategies adopted by the government to check the spread of the contagious disease and the impact of the plague. All these will be examined in details at various points of this study. The plague comes to an end a little after a year.

Camus does an excellent job in his representation of disease in his novel *La peste/The Plague* which many have described as the greatest European novel of the postwar period (<https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebook-of-life/camus-and-the-plague>).

### **Causative Factors of the Plague**

The novel *La peste* opens with a succinct description of the urban coastal space in which occur the events of the chronicle which Albert Camus sets out to narrate: "À première vue, Oran est, en effet, une ville ordinaire et rien de plus qu'une préfecture française de la côte algérienne" (At first sight, Oran is, in fact, an ordinary town and nothing more than a French headquarters of the Algerian coast) (our translation here and elsewhere in this work) (Camus 10).

This prepares the reader's mind to rightly assess and comprehend the opening dramatic and tragic scene of multiple death of rats. As a coastal city, and French Headquarters, Oran can be envisaged as a confluence of races, cultures and languages notably French versus African, white versus Black. Moreover, as a coastal city, ships from other parts of the world particularly France (Marseille) may have anchored in the wharf; sailors may have lodged in hotels in Oran infesting the whole place with disease/plague infected rats, which ultimately will transmit the disease to rats indigenous to Oran, Algeria.

Thus, the epidemic of cholera in Oran must have had as one of the causative factors the migration of disease infected rats from world cities already attacked by the plague to Oran in Algeria.

Infected fleas from the plague infected rats transmit the disease from human to human. A notice is put up inviting all carriers of fleas to present themselves in municipal dispensaries (54-55).

### **Signs and Symptoms of the Plague**

Camus, in *La peste* describes in minute details the signs and symptoms of the plague ravaging Oran, Algeria. “Le concierge était dévoré par la soif” (26) (The caretaker is terribly thirsty). Camus reveals the symptoms through the mouth of his mouthpieces Rieux and Richard: High fever, local inflammation (ganglions) (26). Take, for example, the caretaker’s fever in the afternoon rose to 40 degrees, “le malade délirait sans arrêt et les vomissements avaient repris. Les ganglions du cou étaient douloureux au toucher ....” (26-27) (the sick man was having delirium persistently and vomiting started again. The neck ganglions were painful to touch). The plague is characterised by very high temperature that shoots up in a terrifying way (63). The disease is contagious and deadly.

Rieux chronicles the symptoms of plague from experiential knowledge as follows: stupour, prostration, redness of the eyes, salty mouth, headaches, terrible thirst, delirium, patches on the skin, .... death... (43). The rats are the first sign of the plague’s onset. A sure sign of the presence of an epidemic is wearing of masks and presence of mass graves: le carnaval des médecins masqués pendant la peste noire, les accouplements des vivants dans les cimetières du Milan” (43).

### **Prevalence of the Plague**

The plague described in *La peste* by Camus can be said to have been transmitted from human to human within the confines of Oran in Algeria since despite the challenges encountered by Rieux and others, the plague is finally contained in Oran thanks to the strategies adopted for checking its spread by the authorities.

This is so when the fictional plague is interpreted to be symbolic of the bubonic plague that ravaged the coastal city of Oran in 1849. In this sense, it is an epidemic.

That notwithstanding, where the plague is viewed as symbolic of other plagues that have occurred in the history of the world then one can extrapolate that it is a pandemic which may have spread to Oran from Asia for the Black Death of 14th Century from Italy for the Italian Plague of 1629; from London for the Great Plague of London of 1665; from China for the plagues of China in 15th and 19th centuries; from Marseille in France for the Great Plague of Marseille in 1720. All these plagues are characterised by very high mortality.

### **Impact of the Plague**

One of the findings of this research is that the plague caused great havoc, great human and economic losses for the inhabitants of the coastal city of Oran. Many lives were lost; at a point 500 people were dying in a week. By the end of the plague, Oran was devastated having lost about half of its population in 1849. Citizens of Oran lost their loved ones, for example, the caretaker’s wife who lost her husband, Mr. Othon, who lost his little son. The epidemic unleashed great suffering and pains on the inhabitants of Oran.

Individuals were separated from their loved ones because of lockdown (the entire city was quarantined) and even isolation of victims of the plague, being the measures taken by the government to check the spread of the disease. For example, Rambert was separated from his wife and was making frantic efforts to escape from Oran and rejoin his wife in Paris.

At the end of the plague, Cottard went out of his mind and started to fire his gun into the street until arrested by the police. He was kind of destabilized. This is a form of disease. It was absurd that Dr. Rieux was busy trying to save lives during the pandemic but could not render help to his sick wife who died from the prolonged sickness.

The plague gave some people the opportunity to thrive in fraudulent businesses. For example, Cottard enriched himself tremendously through smuggling during the plague epidemic. This reminds one of what happened during the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970); many enriched themselves through smuggling tagged "Attack Business." Even such is happening with the present-day COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from these negative consequences of the plague, this research discovered a couple of positive impacts. Many months of exile during the plague brought the inhabitants of Oran into contact with reality: they recognised that the plague was a collective disaster which was the concern of everybody and so were compelled to give up their selfish obsession with personal suffering and assume their social responsibility of joining the anti-plague efforts.

Secondly, some misconceptions were rectified. As people were dying from the plague, Father Paneloux gave a severe sermon attributing the plague to God's punishment for the sins of Oran. But when Mr. Othon's little boy suffered excruciating pain and died at the hands of the plague, he was deeply disturbed by the death of this innocent boy and so had to deliver another sermon modifying the first one. He declared that the inexplicable death of innocent people forced the Christian to choose between believing everything and believing nothing about God. For Rieux, Camus' spokesman, the plague was not a punishment for anything deserved. From witnessing the death of Mr. Othon's innocent boy, Dr. Rieux concluded that suffering is completely distributed randomly, something that does not make any sense but is simply absurd. Thus the plague enabled Camus explain out his philosophy of life being absurd. Camus' *peste* throws into relief the powerlessness of the individual characters to control their destinies. This is absurdist viewpoint.

### **Plague in World History Being Reflected**

It is important to note that the intention to write the novel *La peste* pushed Camus into reading extensively about the history of plagues in the world. It would seem that *La peste* is a fictional representation of the great cholera epidemic that ravaged Oran in 1849. It could well be a fictional representation of the fascist 'plague' that inspired the novel. This rise of the plague in the midst of people not prepared for it could reflect the rise of fascism in Europe and the ineffective response to the dangers.

Interestingly, Camus' *La peste* could well represent plagues/pandemics/pestilences/not only of the past but also of the present and of all times, for example, the West African Ebola and the current COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the whole world. The plague in *La peste* could well reflect man's suffering and pains of all times like during the Second World War, like during the Nigerian Civil War and even present-day Nigeria with seemingly insurmountable social insecurity and social malaise.

### **Strategies for Checking the Spread of the Plague**

The authorities in Oran in *La peste* prescribed some preventive measures to be taken in order to check the spread of the epidemic (54):

- Scientific extermination of rats through injecting toxic gas in the drains, sewages,
- Observance of extreme cleanliness by the inhabitants,
- Carriers of fleas to present themselves to the clinics,
- Families to compulsorily declare cases of infection diagnosed medically and
- Consent to the isolation of the sick ones in special wards of the hospital. These wards are equipped to treat the sick ones as quickly as possible with maximum chances of survival.
- Compulsory disinfection of the special wards and transport used for the sick.
- Houses of the sick ones to be disinfected and shut down.
- Relatives of those diagnosed of the disease to undergo screening (tests) (54-55) and quarantine (63).
- Opening of an ancillary hospital in a school (63).
- Lockdown (la fermeture) (66).
- Stoppage of all exchanges of correspondences (69) to avoid letters being vehicles of infection
- Social distancing observed
- The use of masks
- Quarantining of the whole city.

These preventive measures actually helped to curb the rise of infection in the town of Oran

### **Rating of *La peste* as a Disease Literature**

The discussion so far has largely demonstrated that the plague which the novelist Camus represented in *La peste/The Plague* has:

- Causative factors (disease infected fleas carried by rats spread the cholera disease from human to human);
- Has signs and symptoms (e.g. very high temperatures of 40<sup>0</sup>C and above);
- Has prevalence (occurs within the town of Oran);
- Has negative and positive effects (e.g. high death toll and inhabitants of Oran recognizing the plague as a collective disaster calling for a sense of collective responsibilities);
- Is relatively resolved (preventive measures prescribed by the authorities helped check the spread of the cholera epidemic and so it was contained in Oran and came to an end after roughly a year).

Moreover, the plague, in *La peste*, would seem to reflect the cholera epidemic that ravaged Oran in 1849. Therefore, examining *La peste* in the light of Onyemelukwe's criteria for judging and classing a literary work as disease literature, the novel contains among others, the five attributes of disease literature and so, can rightly be classified as disease literature.

## CONCLUSIONS

It has been demonstrated in this study that Albert Camus' *La peste/The Plague* ranks as disease literature. The Twentieth Century icon of absurd literature, an existentialist and a humanist has done an excellent work in *La peste* in his representation of disease in it. Using the disease literary theory propounded by Onyemelukwe in combination with the historical, descriptive and sociological methods, the study established that Camus described in minute details the various stages of development of the plague that wreaked havoc in Oran, a coastal city of Algeria; from the death of one rat, rats died in multiples, in thousands. With government's intervention, dead rats were collected and cremated on daily basis. Then came the catastrophic turn of event – human to human transmission of the cholera that has been spread by disease infected fleas, carried by infected rats. Men began to die in hundreds. The study also identified the main traits of the plague (its signs and symptoms), its negative and positive consequences as well as preventive measures taken by the Government to check the spread of the plague. After roughly a year of total lockdown/quarantine of the city of Oran, the plague was contained in the city.

According to the findings of this research, the plague seemed to reflect, first and foremost, the cholera epidemic which destroyed half of the population of Oran in 1849 and subsequently any other form of plague/human suffering and pains in the past, present and future like World War II and the corona virus pandemic ravaging the 21st Century world. Camus' *La peste* is thus still of great relevance to the present-day world and in particular, to us in Nigeria being ravaged by COVID-19 and other “plagues” – kidnapping, rape, terrorism, banditry, massacres by Fulani cattle herdsman and Boko Haram etc. The study concludes that Camus, even though he might have drawn inspiration to write *La peste* from the fascist “plague” (Nazi occupation of France), his overall influence must have been his philosophy of absurd and so did not seem to be concerned in the novel about one particular plague but plagues of all times. His absurdist viewpoint envisages man as living with one plague or the other, an invisible disease that may kill him at any moment, bringing to an end his life previously conceived as solid. Thus, by plague, man is vulnerable to being randomly killed by a bacterium, an accident or the actions or inactions of fellow human beings. Man's life is basically on the edge of absurd to borrow this term from Camus, whose life was terminated in a car accident.

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