

The Plague Book Notes

The Plague by Albert Camus

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Author/Context

On January 4, 1960, the car Albert Camus was driving to Paris crashed, killing Camus instantly and robbing the world of an author who had won the Nobel Prize just three years before. Camus was forty-six when he died--young for a writer--and most likely would have continued to write important books for many years to come. He had the first draft of a new novel in his briefcase when he died. Camus' death was a great tragedy for his readers, who found in his books both beautiful writing and serious discussions of human freedom, social responsibility, and the search for happiness in a world that Camus believed ended, inescapably, with death. "I do not like to believe that death opens onto another life," he wrote. "For me it is a closed door." (Rhein 4).

Camus was born in 1913 in Algeria, on the northwest coast of Africa. Oran, the setting for *The Plague*, is a port city in this country. Though he spent much of his adult life in France, Camus was a child of the Mediterranean climate, where life was full of sensual pleasures like swimming in the warm sea or basking in the afternoon sun. The pleasures, and torments, of weather and the physical environment are often highlighted in Camus' novels.

His father died when Camus was young, and the family--Albert, his mother, his grandmother, his uncle, and his older brother--lived in a one-room apartment in the city of Algiers. Camus' intelligence was recognized early, and he made it to the University of Algiers, where he studied literature and philosophy. In the midst of his studies, however, Camus contracted tuberculosis, a disease that resurfaced throughout his life. He was eventually forced to withdraw from the university and soon turned his energies to writing.

Camus' work with newspapers and theater groups, which was both political and experimental, nurtured his ideas, and throughout his life Camus filled notebooks with notes that eventually evolved into the novels and essays for which he is famous. His first published work was a book of essays in 1937, and he continued to publish until his death. Camus' most famous works include *The Stranger* (1946), *The Fall* (1957), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955), and *The Plague* (1947). First published in French, *The Plague* has since been translated into sixteen languages.

All of Camus' novels are part art and part philosophy. One of the most admired qualities of Camus' philosophy is that while it does not acknowledge a God, it is still very hopeful. The writer said in an interview in 1951: "When I seek to discover what is most fundamental in myself it is a taste for happiness that I find... There is an invincible sunshine at the heart of my work" (Cruickshank 24). The world did lose a bit of its sunny innocence for Camus, however, with the arrival of World War II. Camus worked with the underground newspaper *Combat* during the Nazi occupation of France, and it has been pointed out that the plague's infestation of Oran might be compared to the Nazis' seize of France.



Camus is often mentioned along with John-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett as a writer who succeeded in capturing the absurdities that define the life of modern men and women. His writing will continue to interest readers as long as random cruelties--disease, hunger, the death of promising young writers--continue to afflict our world.

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Cruikshank, John. *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

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Plot Summary

The book is divided into five sections, each of which tells of a distinct period in the plague's takeover of Oran, the port city in northern Algeria where the story is set. Part 1 describes Oran as it was before the plague and just after the disease has taken hold. Bernard Rieux, the town doctor, notices a dead rat in the hallway of his apartment building one ordinary morning, and thereafter, nothing in his or anyone's life in Oran is normal. Thousands of the town's rats die, then cats and dogs, and finally the disease starts to infect people. Jean Tarrou, a visitor trapped in Oran, keeps a journal about the plague's effect on the people of Oran, and it includes stories about characters like Joseph Grand, an insignificant city worker, and Cottard, a man who is mysteriously happy about the outbreak of the plague. By the end of this section, the people of Oran are forced to realize their dull and habitual ways may be gone for good. The town gates are shut, and Oran is now a prison cell, where no one can go out or come in.

Part 2 of the book tells what happens when the plague becomes "the concern of all of us." (67). In this section, the townspeople struggle to fight their individual battles against the plague and the suffering and separation it forces them to endure. Characters like Raymond Rambert, who begins negotiating with smugglers, try to imagine ways to escape the city and meet up again with their loved ones. Father Paneloux, the town priest, preaches a fiery sermon that claims that God has sent the disease upon the people of Oran as a punishment for their sins. Tarrou starts voluntary sanitary squads in town, and many people, including Grand and Rambert, volunteer to help.

By the beginning of Part 3, "the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all." (167). In this short third section, the narrator tells us of the worst period of the disease, the brutally hot summer months when the plague kills so many people that there's no space left to bury them. The town crematorium is burning bodies at top-capacity and everyone in the city suffers terrible feelings of pain and exile.

In Part 4 there is more attention paid to the emotions of some of the main characters. Cottard is still strangely cheerful about the plague. Rambert's getaway plans seem ready to go through, but the journalist has a last-minute change of heart and decides to stay in Oran to help fight the disease. Many of the story's main characters, including Dr. Rieux, Joseph Grand, Jean Tarrou, and Father Paneloux, are affected profoundly when they witness the death of a young child. After this experience, Paneloux gives a second sermon, and it shows far more sympathy for the suffering people of Oran. One evening, Tarrou explains his life philosophy, which centers on a passionate opposition to the death penalty, to Dr. Rieux. Grand falls ill and seems certain to die of the plague, but makes a sudden and miraculous recovery. The same "resurrection" happens to a woman in town, and by the end of this section, the rats, alive now, have begun to resurface in the city.

In the final section, the plague leaves just as suddenly as it came. After a public announcement that the epidemic seems to be over, a big celebration is held in the



streets. Then the gates are opened, and families and lovers--including Rambert and his wife--are reunited. Cottard, despairing that the plague has gone and left him alone with his suffering again, has a crazy shooting fit, which ends with him being dragged away by the police. At this point, Dr. Rieux reveals that he is the story's narrator. Though he has suffered greatly, and now finds out that his own wife is dead, he says he hoped to retell the book without it being his story. He wanted to "take the victims' side," sharing with them the feelings of love, exile, and suffering that all felt during the time of the plague. The book ends with the haunting observation that although the plague bacillus can go into hiding for years and years, it never dies or disappears for good.



Major Characters

Dr. Rieux: Dr. Rieux narrates the story, but he does not reveal this until the very end of the book. When the plague comes to Oran, Rieux works himself to exhaustion trying to relieve the suffering of the sick. His mind is always working, too, as he tries to understand why the plague has afflicted the innocent people of Oran. By the end of the book, with both his wife and his friend Tarrou dead, Rieux's conclusion is that humans cannot understand suffering, only work to fight it.

Raymond Rambert: A young journalist who comes to Oran for a story and gets locked in when the epidemic arrives. Rambert has a wife in Paris that he desperately wants to return to, and he tries to escape the city with the help of smugglers. This is unsuccessful, so Rambert volunteers to work on the sanitary squads and fight the plague. He survives and is reunited with his wife at the story's end.

Jean Tarrou: A visitor to Oran who becomes a close friend of Dr. Rieux's. Tarrou lives in the town hotel and keeps a journal with his observations of the people of Oran--these observations help the narrator to tell the story. Tarrou has a strong moral code based on the conviction that no human being should ever put another human being to death, and he organizes the sanitary squads to help fight the plague in Oran. He dies of the disease near the very end of the epidemic.

Father Paneloux: A learned Jesuit priest in Oran who gives a fiery and vindictive sermon in the early days of the plague. As the plague spreads, Paneloux works as a volunteer to fight it. He later gives a second sermon that is much more sympathetic. He and Dr. Rieux get into several heated discussions about faith and suffering.

Joseph Grand: A friend of Dr. Rieux's who is a lowly clerk in a municipal office by day and working to write the perfect novel, of which he has only finished one sentence, by night. Grand is sad and regretful about his wife, who left him long ago, and is referred to by the narrator as the 'hero' of the chronicle because of his ability to quietly endure. He keeps the books as the general secretary for the sanitary squads, and although he catches what seems to be the plague near the end of the story, Grand miraculously recovers and lives.

Cottard: Cottard committed a crime before the plague arrived in Oran and is happy as the epidemic escalates because the police are too busy to arrest him and he no longer has to suffer alone. He spends most of the book eating expensive meals and leaving big tips, but when the plague disappears, Cottard is struck again with fear and anxiety. In the end, he has a shooting fit and is dragged off to jail by the police.

Minor Characters

M. Michel: The concierge in Dr. Rieux's apartment building and the first human character to die of the plague.



Mme. Rieux: Dr. Rieux's wife; a thirty-year old woman who has been sick for a long time and leaves Oran for treatment before the plague arrives.

the asthma patient: An old patient of Dr. Rieux's.

M. Othon: The very rule-bound magistrate of Oran.

Jacques: M. Othon's son. He dies painfully from the plague in front of several important characters in the book.

Dr. Richard: Another doctor in Oran. Richard is often hesitant to take any dramatic action against the plague.

the cat man: An old man that Tarrou writes about in his diary who takes great delight in spitting on the neighborhood cats from his high window.

the Prefect: An official in town who must give approval before any major decisions or announcements about the plague are made.

Dr. Castel: Another doctor that Rieux often consults. He works on developing an anti-plague serum.

Mme. Rieux (elder): Dr. Rieux's mother, who comes to live with the doctor just before the outset of the plague.

Jeanne: Joseph Grand's wife, who left him long ago.

Garcia: The first smuggler that Cottard and Rambert discuss Rambert's getaway with.

Raoul: Another smuggler.

Gonzales: The main smuggler in charge of Rambert's case.

Marcel and Louis: Two brothers who are guards at the city gates and are supposed to help Rambert with his getaway.

Tarrou's mother: Tarrou loved his mother quite a lot. He describes her as 'self-effacing.'

Tarrou's father: A man that Tarrou loved and respected and got along with well, until Tarrou saw him argue as a prosecuting attorney for the death of a criminal.



Objects/Places

Oran: A French port city on the Algerian coast, where the story takes place. Oran is a very ordinary city-some would even call it ugly-and its citizens are often described as living with too little imagination and too many habits. A massive plague epidemic descends on Oran and its gates are locked, imprisoning its citizens and sealing the city off from the outside world.

Rats: The first inhabitants of Oran to catch the plague are its rats. People in the city know something is wrong when thousands of rats die every day, so many that a special collection service has to drag away truckloads of them every morning.

Tarrou's diary: These are notebooks full of quirky observations that Tarrou kept while living in Oran. The Narrator uses many of the details in these notebooks to reconstruct the story he tells.

Grand's manuscript: The 'book' that Joseph Grand is working on. Grand is so obsessed with detail that after years of work, he's only completed the first sentence. Even that he's unhappy with.

Sanitary squads: Groups of citizens, organized by Tarrou, which volunteer their services to fight the plague.

Father Paneloux's sermons: Father Paneloux, a well-known priest in Oran, gives two sermons during the time of plague. The first, delivered when the outbreak just begins, is fiery and claims that the disease was sent by God to punish sinners. The second sermon, delivered after Paneloux witnesses the death of a young child, is far less vindictive.

the weather: The weather as reported in the chronicle often reflects the state of affairs in Oran. For example, it turns hot and unbearable and the disease spreads; it is cold and blustery on the day Paneloux gives his second sermon and the epidemic begins to recede.



Quotes

Quote 1: "... [in Oran] 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.'" Part 1, pg. 4

Quote 2: "You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in his veins." Part 1, pg. 16

Quote 3: "... we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away..." Part 1, pg. 37

Quote 4: "They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences." Part 1, pg. 37

Quote 5: "Thus, for example, a feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and-together with fear-the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead." Part 2, pg. 67

Quote 6: "Thus, too, they came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles, which is to live in company with a memory that serves no purpose... Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars." Part 2, pg. 73

Quote 7: "... you can't understand. You're using the language of reason, not of the heart; you live in a world of abstractions." Part 2, pg. 87

Quote 8: "... the dreary struggle in progress between each man's happiness and the abstractions of the plague." Part 2, page 91

Quote 9: "I can understand this sort of fervor and find it not displeasing. At the beginning of a pestilence and when it ends, there's always a propensity for rhetoric. In the first case, habits have not yet been lost; in the second, they're returning. It is in the thick of a calamity that one gets hardened to the truth-in other words, to silence." Part 2, pg. 116

Quote 10: "Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth-with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its goodness." Part 2, pg. 126

Quote 11: "Many fledgling moralists in those days were going about our town proclaiming there was nothing to be done about it and we should bow to the inevitable. And Tarrou, Rieux, and their friends might give one answer or another, but its



conclusion was always the same, their certitude that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down... There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical." Part 2, pg. 133

Quote 12: "... invariably their epical or prize-speech verbiage jarred on the doctor. Needless to say, he knew the sympathy was genuine enough. But it could be expressed only in the conventional language with which men try to express what unites them with mankind in general; a vocabulary quite unsuited, for example, to Grand's small daily effort..." Part 2, pg. 138

Quote 13: "No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all." Part 3, pg. 167

Quote 14: "The truth is that nothing is less sensational than pestilence, and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are monotonous." Part 3, pg. 179

Quote 15: "... the habit of despair is worse than despair itself." Part 3, pg. 181

Quote 16: "... evening after evening gave its truest, mournfulest expression to the blind endurance that had outlasted love from all our hearts." Part 3, pg. 185

Quote 17: "... though they have an instinctive craving for human contacts, [they] can't bring themselves to yield to it, because of the mistrust that keeps them apart." Part 4, pg. 199

Quote 18: "Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business." Part 4, page 210

Quote 19: "No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture." Part 4, pg. 218

Quote 20: "No, we should go forward, groping our way through the darkness, stumbling perhaps at times, and try to do what good lay in our power. As for the rest, we must hold fast, trusting in the divine goodness, even as to the deaths of little children, and not seeking personal respite." Part 4, pg. 227

Quote 21: "And that, too, is natural enough. In fact, it comes to this: nobody is capable of really thinking about anyone, even in the worst calamity." Part 4, pg. 241

Quote 22: "... we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace." Part 4, pg. 252

Quote 23: "What's natural is the microbe. All the rest-heath, 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." Part 4, page 253



Quote 24: "... once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended." Part 5, pg. 272

Quote 25: "Yes, he'd make a fresh start, once the period of abstractions was over..." Part 5, pg. 288

Quote 26: "So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories." Part 5, pg. 291

Quote 27: "Once plague had shut the gates of the town, they had settled down to a life of separation, debarred from the living warmth that gives forgetfulness of all." Part 5, pg. 298

Quote 28: "... if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love." Part 5, pg. 300

Quote 29: "... what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise." Part 5, pg. 308



Topic Tracking: Abstraction

Part 1

Abstraction 1: The narrator's remarks on how people tend to think pestilence is just a bad dream. Dr. Rieux cannot really feel the horror of a hundred million people dead. This indicates that the human tendency is to abstract, or to feel emotionally detached from the reality of the plague and its horrors.

Abstraction 2: The hesitation of Rieux and the others to define the epidemic as the plague shows that they're resisting dealing with the disease as something real. The woman that Rieux sees die in the street on his drive home, however, is very real. When a person violently dies in front of you, it is impossible to remain detached.

Part 2

Abstraction 3: Rambert accuses Dr. Rieux of being too abstract because the doctor won't allow Rambert the real happiness of leaving the town to reunite with his wife. Rambert's accusations make the doctor think that man struggles between feeling concrete happiness and the following abstract rules and beliefs that could stand in the way of this happiness.

Abstraction 4: God is suggested to be abstract, and in times of suffering, people focus on concrete pleasures--sex, good food--to give them solace.

Abstraction 5: The sanitary squads kick the people of the town into doing something tangible to help fight the plague.

Abstraction 6: Dr. Rieux finds that sympathy expressed through words is never adequate--language is always abstract and is often unable to express complicated emotions.

Abstraction 7: Rambert, in his discussion with Dr. Rieux, makes it very clear that he will only live and die for love, never for an idea. Despite this assertion, and because it's taking so long to get out of Oran, he dutifully stays and volunteers for the sanitary squads.

Part 3

Abstraction 8: The townspeople lose hope and are ready to die once those they love fall from memory (become abstract).

Part 4

Abstraction 9: Jacques' death is very concrete, and seeing it changes and/or reinforces the way the witnesses think about abstract thinking.



Abstraction 10: M. Othon, after the death of his son, is motivated to do something tangible to help the plague effort and volunteers at the same quarantine camp from which he was just released.

Part 5

Abstraction 11: When the people return to Oran, it is clear that there will be some happiness for those who are reunited with their loved ones. Happiness, Rieux says, is always less certain when people put their hope in ideas rather than people.



Topic Tracking: Exile

Part 1

Exile 1: The hotel in Oran is a collection site for people like Rambert and Tarrou, who are in the town as foreigners, exiles from another place.

Exile 2: When the town gates are shut, its citizens are all exiled together, quarantined from the outside world.

Part 2

Exile 3: The quotation on page 67 directly refers to this time of plague as a "long period of exile."

Exile 4: The psychological state of exile is fully defined by the narrator: it is to live detached from the past--with a "memory that serves no purpose," and devoid of hope for the future. An exile lives like a prisoner, only his mind is the prison.

Exile 5: The feeling of exile is such a desperate emotion that some people are willing to risk being shot in an attempt to escape the forced exile imposed upon them by the locked city gates.

Part 3

Exile 6: In Part 3 there is much focus on how at this point, the people of Oran are all exiled together.

Part 4

Exile 7: The experience of exile is heightened in the plague-ridden town because the townspeople, paranoid about catching the disease, are afraid to get close to each other.

Exile 8: Rambert, one of the most exiled characters, realizes that the plague is not just a source of isolation--it has also made him feel more of a member of the town. Now he feels he must stay and fight the disease.

Exile 9: Those in the quarantine camp display typical behavior of exiles--they are uninterested in most everything and their minds are elsewhere, as if on a forced vacation.

Part 5

Exile 10: The exile of the townspeople is over when they again have their living, breathing loved ones around them.

Exile 11: At the chronicle's conclusion, Dr. Rieux says that "love, exile and suffering" were what everyone shared in Oran during the plague.



Topic Tracking: Love

Part 1

Love 1: The words that Dr. Rieux struggles for when he's saying goodbye to his wife indicate that he doesn't feel he's loved her and cared for her as well as he could have.

Love 2: The cat man's behavior, although a little odd, indicates he feels a kind of love for the cats.

Part 2

Love 3: The narrator explains that a great source of suffering is being physically separated from the people you love.

Love 4: The feelings motivated by love, especially the desire to see loved ones again, is more passionately felt by the citizens of Oran than the horror of the death around them.

Love 5: Joseph Grand is torn up by lost love, and is saddened by the idea that he was unable to keep his love with Jeanne alive by talking things through.

Love 6: The townspeople of Oran, including Rambert, find that memories they have for loved ones paralyze them--these memories keep them from being so miserable that they absolutely must fight against the plague.

Love 7: Rambert says that it is only worth living and dying for love, not for an idea.

Part 3

Love 8: Rieux's observation that "blind endurance... had outlasted love" supposes that enough suffering and long enough isolation from a loved one might kill love.

Part 5

Love 9: Dr. Rieux loses two major chances at being able to love at the chronicle's end--both Tarrou and his wife are lost to death.

Love 10: Dr. Rieux's conclusion is that loving humans is a more certain path to happiness than loving ideas.

Love 11: Love is mentioned as one emotion that all the citizens of Oran, and all the world, have in common.



Topic Tracking: Suffering

Part 1

Suffering 1: The people of Oran are not accustomed to suffering prior to the arrival of the plague. They live a comfortable life, with very few high or low extremes.

Suffering 2: The descriptions of the deaths of both M. Michel and the rats--bloody and painful--show that the plague is a source of great physical suffering for those who are infected.

Suffering 3: Cottard's behavior, and his comment that "secret grief" led him to attempt suicide, indicates that something is making him suffer inside.

Suffering 4: Numbers, stories, and facts only make Dr. Rieux *think* about the plague; he cannot *feel* the pain of those who have suffered.

Part 2

Suffering 5: The separation from loved ones who are locked outside of Oran is a great source of suffering for the townspeople.

Suffering 6: Father Paneloux's first sermon expresses very little sympathy or understanding for the townspeople's suffering. He claims the plague is what they deserved, and that earthly suffering is God's way of punishing sinners.

Suffering 7: Dr. Rieux's belief is that anyone who has dealt with human beings in pain will want to get in there and relieve their suffering, not sit back and preach about it.

Part 4

Suffering 8: After watching an innocent child die, Dr. Rieux tells Paneloux he cannot reconcile himself to a God or a theory of love in which children are allowed to suffer like this.

Suffering 9: Tarrou believes that killing another human being, even a criminal, shows a complete lack of sympathy for other people's suffering and that the death penalty must be fought at all costs.

Suffering 10: Rieux and Tarrou, when they take their swim in the sea, are able to escape the suffering of the plague for a few minutes.

Part 5

Suffering 11: Upon the death of his friend Tarrou, Dr. Rieux realizes that knowledge and memories are what people get from suffering the death of loved ones.



Part 1 (Section 1)

Oran, the setting of the novel, is a French port on the Algerian coast, a small city that is about as ordinary as a city can be. Not only is it ordinary, it's ugly--with no trees and broiling hot weather in the summer and endless mud in the winter--a lifeless place to live and a miserable place to die. The narrator of the story, who doesn't tell us his name, lives in Oran. He knows the people of this city well, and describes them:

"... 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.'" Part 1, pg. 4

This is not very different from other cities of the world, says the narrator, where most people seem to fritter away a lot of their time. And it's not a horrible place--if you get in a habit, you can have an easy life here, and there is no social unrest in the town.

Topic Tracking: Suffering 1

The narrator's story starts on April 16, in the 1940s, when Dr. Bernard Rieux steps on a rat in the hallway of his apartment building. He tells the concierge M. Michel about the rat, but the concierge refuses to believe that there are rodents in his building. That evening there is another rat--this one dies in front of Dr. Rieux--sweating, swaying, and spurting blood before it goes stiff. The blood makes Dr. Rieux think about his sick wife, Mme. Rieux, who is leaving for treatment at a sanatorium the next day.

The next morning, before he starts his morning rounds, Dr. Rieux finds more dead rats in the hallway. As he drives to the outskirts of town, he sees even more rats. His first patient of the day, a sickly old Spanish asthma patient who spends his days moving dried peas from one pot to another, is very excited about the rats, shouting oddly that it's "the hunger!" that has brought the rats out to die. All around town, people are talking about the rats.

Dr. Rieux takes his wife to the train station, and after he confesses that he wishes he'd been a better husband to her, they decide they will make a fresh start when she returns from the sanatorium. Until then, Rieux's mother will come and live in his apartment, to take care of him in the absence of his wife.

Topic Tracking: Love 1

After the train leaves, Rieux runs into M. Othon, the town magistrate, and his young son, Jacques. Othon is tall and dark--he seems both worldly and overly stiff, and he expresses some concern about all of these dead rats to Rieux. Rieux says he thinks it's nothing to worry about.

The next day, a young journalist named Raymond Rambert calls on Rieux, wanting information for an article he's writing about the living conditions among the Arab



population in Oran. Dr. Rieux, who believes strongly that the Arabs are living in horrible conditions, tells this to Rambert, and asks him if he is willing to tell the whole truth in his article. He doesn't like Rambert's answer, and refuses to help.

Later that day, in the hallway, Rieux runs into Jean Tarrou, a youngish man with a big, furrowed face, and together they watch another rat die. Rieux runs into the concierge again, who is now definitely bothered by the rats, and looking a little sick himself. Soon the city starts to clean the streets of rats, and there are so many rats that the people of Oran start to get a little uneasy:

"You must picture the consternation of our little town, hitherto so tranquil, and now, out of the blue, shaken to its core, like a quite healthy man who all of a sudden feels his temperature shoot up and the blood seething like wildfire in his veins." Part 1, pg. 16

It gets as bad as 8000 dead rats in one day, when, suddenly, the dead rats disappear. This same day, Rieux finds M. Michel looking very sick; he is sweating and swelling, leaning on the arm of Father Paneloux, the learned Jesuit priest in town. Rieux sends the concierge to bed, and not long after gets a call from one of his former patients, Joseph Grand, who says one of his neighbors has had an accident and needs help at once. The neighbor, Cottard, has tried, unsuccessfully, to hang himself. Cottard gets very nervous when Rieux says that as a formality, the police have to be notified.

When Rieux returns to check on the concierge, he finds him vomiting, sprouting ganglia, and running a high fever. He is in extreme pain, and Rieux is so disturbed by the case that he calls a medical colleague, Richard, to ask if he's seen any similar cases. Richard says yes, two, and although M. Michel has a brief moment of improvement, he dies an awful death in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, screaming as he dies: "Them rats!"

Topic Tracking: Suffering 2



Part 1 (Section 2)

A lot of the material for this story, the narrator tells us, came from Jean Tarrou's diary. Tarrou, a visitor to Oran, is a great observer of small details, and he has an odd way of being amused by the ugliness of the city. One of the scenes he writes is about the cat man who has a ritual from which he derives great pleasure: calling the neighborhood cats from his window and then vigorously spitting on them when they arrive. The progress of the plague is evident when the cats stop coming to his window; the felines are presumably the newest group of plague victims.

Topic Tracking: Love 2

Tarrou also writes about an odd, overly formal family, who dines at the restaurant of the hotel where he's staying. He tells of his conversations with the hotel manager, who is disturbed that dead rats can be found in the poor neighborhoods as well as his fancy hotel. The plague does not discriminate.

Topic Tracking: Exile 1

With nearly twenty people dead in the last few days, Rieux gets worried enough to call Richard again. Rieux wants to take some official action to stop the disease, but Richard says nothing can be done without the okay of the Prefect, the bureaucrat with the power to make those sort of decisions.

The weather is getting steamy, and as Dr. Rieux drives out to visit Cottard, the man who attempted suicide, he feels more and more nervous about what's happening in the town. Joseph Grand, who lives in the same building as Cottard, invites Rieux to his room--on the table, Rieux notices Grand's manuscript--a novel, a history... Rieux doesn't ask. The police inspector, who Cottard was so nervous about, takes a short statement from Cottard who claims "secret grief" led him to attempt suicide.

Topic Tracking: Suffering 3

Thus far no one has used the word "plague" to describe the disease that is claiming more and more lives, and it is one of Rieux's colleagues, Castel, who presses Rieux to admit that the plague is what they are dealing with. The two doctors hope this epidemic will not be as horrible as the plagues of the past.



Part 1 (Section 3)

The plague has now been called by its proper name, but no one wants to believe it's for real:

"... we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogey of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away..." Part 1, pg. 37

And because the townspeople don't accept the plague, they keep on living their lives as they normally would. The narrator says:

"They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences." Part 1, pg. 37

Dr. Rieux is having a hard time looking the reality of the plague in the face. Although he has heard that plagues over history have caused nearly a hundred million deaths, that number really doesn't mean anything to him--he can't feel something so abstract. Even though he has lots of specific images of the plague to help it feel more real, nothing works, not even imagining the Athenians burning bodies dead from the plague on the shores of the sea. The doctor resolves that his most logical course of action is to not get so absorbed in imagining, and simply do his job as a doctor.

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 1

Topic Tracking: Suffering 4



Part 1 (Section 4)

Grand and Cottard visit Dr. Rieux because Cottard wants to apologize for causing trouble. Grand leaves in the middle of their walk, saying he has to return home to do some work. He is still mysterious about what exactly this work is, and all this makes Dr. Rieux, who considers Grand a kind, but rather insignificant man, curious about Grand. He has never risen from the same civil service job he started at twenty-two years ago, nor gotten a raise. His particular character trait, Rieux thinks, is the odd difficulty he has finding his words. Rieux is rather charmed by Grand, and he is still unwilling to believe that in a place so full of individuals, the faceless disease has a chance.

Rieux, Richard and Castel, finally get together with the Prefect to discuss what to do about the disease. Castel tells the men there is no anti-plague serum left in the district. Castel is eager for them to tell the public that the disease is the plague, while others, especially Richard, want to follow a wait-and-see policy. Rieux, who is particularly evasive about whether it should be publicly called "the plague," nevertheless is convinced that something needs to be done, or half the population could die. Without ever giving his consent to an official public announcement that the plague is upon them, Rieux storms out of the meeting. On his drive home he sees a woman, bloody and screaming, dying of the plague in the street.

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 2



Part 1 (Section 5)

The next day, a few small official notices are tacked up around town, warning of the disease in a manner designed not to alarm the population. A general program has been drawn up, with regulations including transport of infected people to sick wards, and the advice to be particularly attentive to cleanliness.

Grand and Rieux discuss Cottard, who Grand says has become uncharacteristically nice and generous since the outbreak of the disease. He has invited Grand to expensive restaurants and has shown quite a lot of interest in Grand's writing project. He's also been saying some odd things, such as his comment to Grand about a waiter: "He's a nice fellow, and he'd make a good witness." Although Dr. Rieux is willing to dismiss all this as agitation, Grand suspects Cottard has something very big on his conscience. When the doctor visits Cottard in his dark apartment, Cottard is acting very strange. He wants to know if you can be arrested if you're in a hospital ward, and when he leaves Rieux he shouts back passionately that the town needs "An earthquake! A big one!" (pg. 59).

Dr. Rieux continues to tend to the sick, an exhausting process, especially because his patients are being difficult, refusing to entrust themselves to him as they used to. The death toll is rising, and the sick wards have already filled up. We are up to forty deaths a day. The serum arrives from Paris, but there is not enough of it to do much good. Though the daily life of the townspeople has still not drastically changed, the number of deaths is such that something must be done. The Prefect gives Dr. Rieux an official telegram: "Proclaim a state of plague stop close the town." The town gates are shut.

Topic Tracking: Exile 2



Part 2 (Section 1)

The town gates have been locked, and the Prefect's office makes it clear that no one will receive special treatment regarding requests to come or go. Soon letters aren't allowed, for they might transfer infection; telephone calls are outlawed, and the only way townspeople can communicate with those stranded outside the gates is by short and impersonal telegrams. The narrator says:

"Thus, for example, a feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and--together with fear--the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead." Part 2, pg. 67

Topic Tracking: Exile 3

Topic Tracking: Suffering 5

Topic Tracking: Love 2

Although this is serious suffering for the people of Oran, only one couple elects to bring the person who is stranded outside of the gates back in, where they will be exposed to the plague--this is Dr. Castel and his wife. All others accept the separation, though in the absence of their loved ones, they are lonely and even jealous. The townspeople are made even more miserable because they are stuck with the same dull activities inside the same dull town:

"Thus, too, they came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles, which is to live in company with a memory that serves no purpose... Hostile to the past, impatient of the present, and cheated of the future, we were much like those whom men's justice, or hatred, forces to live behind prison bars." Part 2, pg. 73

People like Rambert, who are not even natives to Oran, are feeling particularly exiled.

Topic Tracking: Exile 4

The townspeople are getting dependent upon the weather, and they are finding that language is not really working to convey sympathy any more. What saves them from real misery, ironically, is that they are in such despair over the absence of loved ones that they don't have the time or focus to panic about the horror around them.

Topic Tracking: Love 4



Part 2 (Section 2)

With no cars or ships coming into Oran, the city has a sort of deadness to it. Soon there are more restrictions: gas is rationed, and food sales and the use of electricity are restricted. The radio has begun announcing the daily number of deaths, but like Dr. Rieux's inability to really feel the reality of a hundred million plague deaths, the citizens, even given these numbers, want to believe the plague is temporary. The citizens wander the streets in the afternoon, frequent the picture houses and cafes, and Oran almost has the appearance of a town on holiday.

Cottard's odd enthusiasm at the plague's escalation continues, and Dr. Rieux finally learns some more interesting details from Grand about Grand's life. His young wife Jeanne, left him many years ago, and is still tormented by her memory and the realization that: "A time came when I should have found the words to keep her with me--only I couldn't."(pg. 83).

Topic Tracking: Love 5

Raymond Rambert approaches Dr. Rieux, hoping that the doctor might be able to give him some sort of official certification of good health that will let him leave Oran and return to his wife in Paris, whom he misses desperately. When Rieux says Rambert's leaving is impossible, Rambert replies:

"... you can't understand. You're using the language of reason, not of the heart; you live in a world of abstractions." Part 2, pg. 87

This is the struggle of the whole town in this reign of the plague: "... the dreary struggle in progress between each man's happiness and the abstractions of the plague." Part 2, page 91

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 3

Part 2 (Section 3)

On a rainy day in the officially organized Week of Prayer, Father Paneloux delivers his fiery sermon to the people of Oran. The sermon begins: "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" (pg. 94).

Paneloux preaches that the plague has been sent by God to separate the good people from the bad, to harvest the "wheat" for heaven and leave behind the "chaff" for their punishment of horrible suffering. He shows very little sympathy.

Topic Tracking: Suffering 6

With the arrival of sizzling summer heat, and perhaps as a consequence of Paneloux's sermon, the people of Oran finally break into widespread panic. Grand and Rieux, walking one night, see a dying lunatic on the street, which so unnerves Grand that they go for a drink together, where Grand tells Rieux a little more about his mysterious "work." He confesses that he is indeed working on a book, which he wants to be so perfect that the publisher, upon reading it, will stand up in his office and demand all give a "hat's off" to Grand and his stunning creation. Rieux asks for a sample reading and Grand reads him his first line: "One fine morning in the month of May an elegant young horsewoman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne" (pg. 104). Apparently, after years of work, this is all Grand has written.

Rambert is still struggling with officialdom: he is asked to fill out papers and generally confronted with huge amounts of red tape. He gets depressed, and begins wandering around cafes and hanging out at the railroad station, trying to take his mind off of his troubles. Rambert finds himself in a strange psychological position: all of his memories of his wife in Paris keep him both miserable, but sated enough to not be able to take any real action.

Topic Tracking: Love 6



Part 2 (Section 4)

The hot weather is baking the already miserable townspeople, and the summer that used to be for sunbathing and holidays is now given to the plague. There is a bit of lawlessness simmering, and the police are now patrolling the streets and guarding the gates with revolvers.

Topic Tracking: Exile 5

Tarrou's diary notes that the radio is announcing the number of deaths per day now, rather than per week, and the cat man has gone from hope to sadness after trying to call the cats with no reply for a week. Of Paneloux's sermon, Tarrou writes:

"I can understand this sort of fervor and find it not displeasing. At the beginning of a pestilence and when it ends, there's always a propensity for rhetoric. In the first case, habits have not yet been lost; in the second, they're returning. It is in the thick of a calamity that one gets hardened to the truth--in other words, to silence." Part 2, pg. 116

Tarrou explains the meaning of the two pots that the old asthma patient is always moving peas back and forth between. Instead of using a watch, the old man--who wants to do nothing with his days--moves the peas back and forth to keep track of time. Tarrou is curious about the man, and wonders if his behavior is that of a saint.

Though shops are running out of goods and restaurants are low on food, the cafes fill to capacity at lunchtime. People spend their money like it's going out of style, and are generally living recklessly; knowing that they may die at any moment, they've turned away from God and to more immediate sorts of satisfaction.

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 4

Tarrou comes to visit Rieux, volunteering his help with the plague epidemic--he has drawn up a plan for voluntary helpers, and wants it enacted without having to go through the official channels, which he thinks are inadequate against the plague. As he's discussing this plan with Rieux, the two get into a discussion about morals in the time of plague, particularly about what role God might have in a world with this sort of suffering. When Tarrou asks the doctor whether he believes in God, Rieux says he does not. The doctor further clarifies his personal philosophy when Tarrou asks him to compare himself with Paneloux:

"Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth--with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its goodness." Part 2, pg. 126

Topic Tracking: Suffering 7



Tarrou's explanation of his own moral beliefs is mysterious. When the doctor asks him if he really believes he knows everything about life, Tarrou says yes, he does. What he's after, he says, is "comprehension."

Tarrou's good intentions are put into use via his development of sanitary squads, groups of volunteers that bring the townspeople together with a common cause for all. It's not just the doctors and the officials now fighting the plague:

"Many fledgling moralists in those days were going about our town proclaiming there was nothing to be done about it and we should bow to the inevitable. And Tarrou, Rieux, and their friends might give one answer or another, but its conclusion was always the same, their certitude that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down... There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical." Part 2, pg. 133

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 5

Grand's part as a volunteer is to keep the books as a general secretary to the sanitary squads, a job he takes on without any protest. Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, who are seeing more of Grand, begin to take an interest in the manuscript he's working on. His struggle with his book reveals itself to be a painstaking obsession with that one sentence. Every word has such potential to create an image, which may be the wrong image or one that is not vivid enough in the reader's mind, that the struggle to find the perfect words might go on forever. Indeed, Rieux thinks that human language is failing to express sentiments about the plague as well. Of the comments of encouragement outsiders send on to Oran, the narrator says:

"... invariably their epical or prize-speech verbiage jarred on the doctor. Needless to say, he knew the sympathy was genuine enough. But it could be expressed only in the conventional language with which men try to express what unites them with mankind in general; a vocabulary quite unsuited, for example, to Grand's small daily effort..." Part 2, pg. 138

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 6



Part 2 (Section 5)

The narrator tells more about Rambert's continuing struggle to escape Oran and be reunited with his wife. Having had no success with attempts to go through official channels, Rambert finally begins to make some advances with the help of Cottard, who is involved with smuggling ventures in plague-ridden Oran.

The smugglers Cottard tries to rendezvous with are what one might expect: difficult to get in touch with and a bit suspicious, but willing to get Rambert out of the city if he's willing to pay. The smugglers, who do their work down by the port, include Garcia, Raoul, and Gonzales. Gonzales, an ardent soccer player who is also described as "horse-face," arranges that Rambert should stay with Marcel and Louis, two young brothers who are guards at the city gates and who will smuggle Rambert out of Oran.

Although Rambert's getaway is set for a few days later, it doesn't happen. The smugglers, for various reasons, don't show at many of the meetings, and Rambert begins to get anxious and depressed, and seems to be drinking a lot. One night when he's drinking with Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, Tarrou says it's a shame that Rambert won't be sticking around, because he could be a big help in one of the sanitary squads. Tarrou has already succeeded in getting Father Paneloux to join the squads. One person who won't join the squads is Cottard, who continues to be perversely satisfied by the escalation of the plague. Tarrou finally guesses why Cottard thinks this way--Cottard did something wrong before the plague broke out and was about to be arrested, but the plague has kept the police so busy that he's safe until it ends.

Tarrou, Rieux, and Rambert get into another philosophical discussion one night: about whether it is worth dying for an idea, or only for love. Rambert and Rieux take opposite sides on this issue. Rambert claims he doesn't believe in the heroism of dying for an idea, that he only believes in living or dying for what one loves. Rieux thinks that saving people from the plague is not heroism, only common decency. When Tarrou tells Rambert that Rieux is separated from his wife, too, this has a powerful effect on Rambert. The morning after this discussion, Rambert calls and says that while he waits for his getaway, he would like to volunteer for the sanitary squads.

Topic Tracking: Love 7

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 7

Part 3

It is now mid-August, and the plague is completely in control of the people of Oran:

"No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and emotions shared by all." Part 3, pg. 167

High winds gust through Oran, and the people close themselves up in their homes. The plague also attacks the central districts of the city. These areas are cordoned off by officials, to help prevent the spread of the disease. The townspeople are getting crazier, and arson, looting, and attempts at escape make the officials declare a state of martial law. A curfew is imposed in the city. Any social hierarchy in the city is being erased--prisoners and guards both have an equal probability of being stricken dead. Though some attempts to distinguish some citizens of rank above the others are tried, like giving a "plague metal" to military guards who die at their posts, these measures don't work to anyone's satisfaction.

The narrator gives a description of the evolution of funerals in Oran, which began as a hasty and official procedure designed to minimize risk of contamination from plague-ridden dead bodies. As coffins became scarcer and the number of deaths rose, the funerals got faster and faster, and less and less personal. For a while, bodies were merely dumped in mass graves and covered with quicklime, and now that there is no more space in the graveyards, the bodies are burned in the crematorium.

Though all of this sounds horrible, the narrator tells us that the plague was in fact very non-dramatic:

"The truth is that nothing is less sensational than pestilence, and by reason of their very duration great misfortunes are monotonous." Part 3, pg. 179

The townspeople's worst distress is the continued pain of separation from those outside the city gates, but even this pain is beginning to dull. The people of Oran are losing their memory, and some, including Dr. Rieux, realize that:

"... the habit of despair is worse than despair itself." Part 3, pg. 181

The people of the town are moving like zombies within a cage now and the city is so lifeless that:

"... evening after evening gave its truest, mournfulest expression to the blind endurance that had outlasted love from all our hearts." Part 3, pg. 185

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 8

Topic Tracking: Exile 6

Topic Tracking: Love 8



Part 4 (Section 1)

September and October are months to "mark time" in Oran--the plague continues to do its deadly work, and rain settles over the city. The townspeople are now exhausted from doing battle with the disease, and sick of hearing about it on the radio and in the newspapers. Rieux hears that his wife's condition has worsened, and admits to Grand that their long separation is wearing on him. He has also realized that although he is a doctor and his job is normally to cure, the job now is merely to diagnose. A case of the plague means inevitable death.

The one person in town who is not afflicted with indifference and exhaustion is Cottard, whom Tarrou has recorded observations of in his diary under the heading: "Cottard and his Relations with the Plague." Cottard is cheerful to have company in his misery. Before the plague, he suffered alone with the guilt over whatever crime it was he committed. When Tarrou suggests that only with a clean conscience can one really feel connected to other humans, Cottard absolutely disagrees. The one way of making people hang together, Cottard says, is to "give 'em a spell of the plague."

Tarrou describes the nights he and Cottard went out together, and how the people of Oran are now decidedly in search of fast and luxurious pleasure. They spend lavishly for expensive goods, leave big tips at restaurants, and display their passion on the streets. Cottard feels a sort of pity for the townspeople, who are alienated from each other because they are afraid of getting infected if they get too close to another. Tarrou explains:

"... though they have an instinctive craving for human contacts, [they] can't bring themselves to yield to it, because of the mistrust that keeps them apart." Part 4, page 199

Topic Tracking: Exile 7

Tarrou's notes end with a story about an evening he and Cottard went to the opera house. One of the actors seemed to be performing in an exaggerated way--actually, he was dying from the plague on stage. In the middle of a duet, he dies dramatically, and the crowd rises to leave, at first calmly, but then pandemonium sets in as all flee for the exits. Walking out with Cottard, seeing all of the left-behind belongings of those who had rushed out, Tarrou feels that the scene was a perfect illustration of the townspeople's lives those days.

Rambert's getaway plans progress a bit: he moves in with Marcel and Louis so that he will be ready to leave when the going is good, and spends several days in the house with the boys' reserved and religious mother. Finally, all is set for Rambert to leave the next day, at midnight. Rambert goes to look for Dr. Rieux, and finds him in the hospital. There, before Rieux and Tarrou, Rambert quietly announces he's not leaving--he'd be ashamed to do so. Though Dr. Rieux says there is nothing shameful in wanting to return to happiness and love, Rambert explains:



"Until now I always felt a stranger in this town, and that I'd no concern with you people. But now that I've seen what I have seen, I know that I belong here whether I want it or not. This business is everybody's business." Part 4, page 210

Topic Tracking: Exile 8



Part 4 (Section 2)

M. Othon's son falls ill, forcing the whole family into quarantine. The son, Jacques, is very sick and it is decided that he will be the test case for Dr. Castel's newly concocted anti-plague serum. Rieux, Tarrou, Castel, Paneloux, and Grand keep watch at the bedside of the small boy as the serum takes effect. As the boy writhes in pain before them, all that watch are deeply affected. The serum does not work and the child dies, suffering horribly.

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 9

After the child's death, Dr. Rieux is very disturbed, and on his way out of the hospital gets into an argument with Father Paneloux. The priest, though distressed by the death, believes that the death is the act of God and cannot be questioned and "perhaps we should love what we can't understand." Rieux disagrees:

"No, Father. I've a very different idea of love. And until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture." Part 4, pg. 218

Topic Tracking: Suffering 8

Father Paneloux, who has been working in the midst of the plague, gives his second sermon to the town. It is a windy day, and the church is barely three-quarters full, indicating, the narrator tells us, the general loss of religious fervor in the city, where superstition has replaced religion. In this sermon, Paneloux speaks more gently, and includes himself in his views, using the pronoun "we" rather than "you." And this time, rather than saying the plague was sent by God to punish sinners, Paneloux claims that as hard as it may be, Christians must try to find the good in bad situations. The sermon preaches Christian hope and faith rather than retribution. Paneloux tries to address the question he and Dr. Rieux argued about just after Jacques' death--how could there be a good God in a world where children can suffer? Paneloux's answer is that this is not something humans will necessarily be able to understand, no matter how hard they try--it is the will of God, and as Christians they must "believe everything or deny everything" (pg. 224). His philosophy, although it differs from Dr. Rieux's in that God is behind everything, is similar in its emphasis on doing your work in times of struggle and suffering:

"No, we should go forward, groping our way through the darkness, stumbling perhaps at times, and try to do what good lay in our power. As for the rest, we must hold fast, trusting in the divine goodness, even as to the deaths of little children, and not seeking personal respite." Part 4, pg. 227

Like Tarrou, who has had to move out of his hotel (he has gone to live at Dr. Rieux's house), the plague has forced Father Paneloux out of his residence. He moves in with a pious old lady, with whom Paneloux has a generally wordless and slightly stressed relationship. Not long after, the priest falls ill in her home. He refuses to see a doctor,



saying it's against his principles, and seems indifferent to the disease that's taking hold. Dr. Rieux is eventually called in and Paneloux dies, clutching a crucifix. His death, however, is less violent than a typical plague death, and his case is recorded as a "Doubtful case."

It is All Soul's Day--the Day of the Dead--and the holiday passes without flowers or remembrances. The death toll is not rising, and just as an official meeting is about to happen to discuss making an announcement about how the mortality rate is still holding steady, Dr. Richard dies of the disease. Food is beginning to run seriously low in Oran, and profiteers are exploiting this state of affairs, selling limited food at a huge profit to people who have the money.

Tarrou and Rambert take Gonzales, who has consented to work in the anti-plague effort, to the city stadium, which is now serving as a quarantine camp. The detainees are quiet and idle--they don't want to think of death so they think of nothing. Tarrou also writes in his journal that these men are forgotten, even by those relatives who are thinking about how to get them out of the camp. Tarrou says:

"And that, too, is natural enough. In fact, it comes to this: nobody is capable of really thinking about anyone, even in the worst calamity." Part 4, pg. 241

At the camp, they run into M. Othon, who asks whether his son suffered much. Tarrou lies, saying he does not believe the boy did.

Topic Tracking: Exile 9



Part 4 (Section 3)

It is the end of November, and Tarrou and Dr. Rieux go together to visit the asthma patient. After listening to the patient's odd talk for a while, Rieux and Tarrou go to a terrace above the old man's apartment and sit for a talk. On the terrace, Tarrou tells the long story of how he developed the beliefs he has today. Tarrou tells of his mother, who was a quiet and self-effacing woman and his father, a nice man who had a hobby of memorizing all of the times in the railway directory. His father was a prosecuting attorney, and when Tarrou was seventeen, his father invited him to watch him in court. The experience, in which Tarrou watched his father argue for the death of an "owlish" looking criminal, shocked Tarrou, and one day, a year later, he left his parents' home. He became an agitator, an opponent of a social order based on the death penalty. He has seen executions, and is horrified by them, and he feels that the whole world is set-off if this sort of killing is allowed:

"... we can't stir a finger in this world without the risk of bringing death to somebody. Yes, I've been ashamed ever since; I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace." Part 4, pg. 252

Tarrou's explanation shows another possible philosophy, which sees human goodness as a matter of choice:

"What's natural is the microbe. All the rest--heath, 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." Part 4, page 253

Topic Tracking: Suffering 9

He also says that human troubles come from the failure to use "plain, clear-cut language," and claims that he's interested in knowing how to become a saint, whether it's possible without believing in God. After this discussion, Rieux and Tarrou, closer friends now, forget the plague for a moment by walking to the pier and taking a swim together in the sea.

Topic Tracking: Suffering 10

As December passes, Dr. Rieux has no more time for leisurely swims. He is surprised one day when M. Othon, who has just been released from quarantine camp, tells him that he wants to return to that same camp to volunteer his services. Something seems to have softened in Othon, who says that working at the camp will make him feel less separated from his son Jacques, the little boy whose dramatic death Rieux and the others witnessed.

Topic Tracking: Abstraction 10



Oran is feeling decidedly un-festive as Christmas approaches, and Joseph Grand is particularly affected by the sadness. His despair one day leads him to faint, and it appears that he may have finally been infected with the plague. Grand is headed toward obvious death when he suddenly recovers in a way so dramatic, the narrator refers to it as a "resurrection." Unfortunately, thinking he was going to die, he had Rieux burn his manuscript. No matter, he says, he has it all memorized anyway. About the same time, a girl afflicted with the plague has a miraculous recovery. When Tarrou and Rieux visit the old asthma patient, he points out another good sign--the rats, which haven't been seen dead or alive since April, have begun scampering around the city again.



Part 4 (Section 4)

Though the citizens of Oran are reluctant to believe the plague might be ending, during suddenly cold January, the deaths start to taper off. And the narrator tells us:

"... once the faintest stirring of hope became possible, the dominion of the plague was ended." Part 5, pg. 272

On January 25, the authorities announce that the epidemic is beaten, an announcement that sends the townspeople parading through the streets in celebration, even though the gates will remain locked and other restrictions will be in effect until the danger is definitively gone. Tarrou, Rambert, and Rieux briefly join with the crowds, and Tarrou sees a cat run out of the darkness. The old cat man will be happy, he thinks, but when he returns to look for the cat man on his street, he finds that the man no longer emerges.

Tarrou's diary remarks on Dr. Rieux's mother, who reminds him of his own mother--both women have a quiet and self-effacing manner that Tarrou finds noble. Cottard, who begins to slide into a clandestine life again, also gets a lot of attention in Tarrou's diary, and one day after Tarrou walks home with Cottard, two government officials are waiting at Cottard's door. Cottard runs into the darkness to avoid them.

Dr. Rieux is met in the hall by his mother and told that Tarrou is sick, just after he had decided that:

"Yes, he'd make a fresh start, once the period of abstractions was over..." Part 5, pg. 282.

After a night of wild storms, during which both the doctor and his mother keep watch over Tarrou, Dr. Rieux's friend enters the worst stage of the disease and they can only watch as Tarrou dies. His friend dead, Rieux thinks:

"So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories." Part 5, pg. 291

On top of all this, Dr. Rieux gets a telegram that he reads with little emotion: his wife died at the sanatorium a week ago.

Topic Tracking: Suffering 10

Topic Tracking: Love 9



Part 5

On a February morning, the gates of Oran are opened again. The separated lovers, like Rambert, wait for their reunion by train. There is celebration in the street among all classes, except of course those who return to find that loved ones did not survive the plague. The people are ready to forget the epidemic, and Rieux looks back to try and make sense of it all:

"Once plague had shut the gates of the town, they had settled down to a life of separation, debarred from the living warmth that gives forgetfulness of all." Part 5, pg. 298

Topic Tracking: Exile 10

He also realizes, thinking about Rambert's struggle:

"... if there is one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love." Part 5, pg. 300

Topic Tracking: Love 10

It is at this point that Dr. Rieux admits that he has been the narrator of the story. He has not revealed his identity because he wished to use the tone of an impartial observer. He hoped to side with the victims and share with them the feelings of "love, exile and suffering," which he believes they all shared in common.

Rieux's chronicle ends with the end of Cottard, a man who Rieux says has a "lonely heart." Grand and Rieux meet outside of Cottard's building, where they find the street has been blocked off because a crazy man is shooting down at the street from inside one of the buildings. The gunman injures a few people and kills a dog before the police are able to drag him out. Rieux and Grand then realize the gunman is Cottard.

It is the old asthma patient that leads Rieux to his last reflections in the novel. The patient seems embarrassed to learn of Tarrou's death, and goes on to say that 'plague' is just life, "no more than that." Rieux agrees with the old asthma patient, but believes that their endurance in the time of plague speaks to their ability to endure during normal times. Before ending the chronicle with the observation that the plague, while it can lie dormant for years, never really disappears, he wishes to state clearly:

"... what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise." Part 5, pg. 308