

CAMUS SPEAKS TO AMERICA IN 2021

Slide 1 – Introduction. So tonight, we're going to spend a little time with the classic work of fiction *The Plague*, by the great existentialist philosopher, novelist, and playwright Albert Camus. Did any of you read this work in college? If so, perhaps this talk will bring back memories. If not, this is your chance to plunge into this great novel.

Slide 2 – Disclaimer. I am NOT a Camus scholar, in fact I know very little about Camus. So if anyone here brings more background, wonderful please contribute your expertise. My purpose this evening is to show how a work of literature can help us think about medicine and more broadly society itself.

Slide 3 – Overview of Session. So the goals for this session are 1) to learn something about the relevance of Camus' philosophy for our troubled times 2) Read an excerpt from *The Plague* in a MRT format 3) Discuss 4) If time, talk about uses in medical education

Slide 4 – What is Medical Readers Theater? It is a simple way of using medically-themed skits to help us find new ways of looking at familiar dilemmas. It was pioneered by Todd Savitt, a professor of Bioethics at East Carolina University. We will be participating in a quick readers theater at the end of this presentation.

Slide 5 – Who was Albert Camus? Here are a few interesting facts.

Slide 6 – Concepts. These are some of the concepts associated with Camus

Existentialism: **Existentialism** is a philosophical theory that people are free agents who have control over their choices and actions. **Existentialists** believe that society should not restrict an individual's life or actions and that these restrictions inhibit free will and the development of that person's potential.

Absurdism: a **philosophy** based on the belief that the universe is irrational and meaningless and that the search for order brings the individual into conflict with the universe

Existentialism vs. Absurdism: Both existentialism and absurdism believe the world has no inherent meaning. The difference between the two has to do with how to find meaning in life. Existentialism states that we must create our own meaning. The existentialist mantra is *existence precedes essence*; we are born, we exist, and then we must choose to craft our own essence, our own purpose.

Absurdism, on the other hand, focuses on the tension between a universe that has no meaning and our constant striving to find meaning within this meaninglessness. Camus argued that this ridiculous situation left us with only three alternatives: we can kill ourselves, we can deny the absurdity and take refuge in the myth of religion, or we can embrace the absurdity. To embrace the Absurd is to accept the meaninglessness of it all and move on, to keep living and living as much, as fully as possible (a kind of hedonism of experience).

Slide 7: Evolution. Although Camus' earlier works were firmly rooted in Absurdism, with the rise of the Nazis and the advent of WWII, Camus realized that there had to be more to life than embracing absurdity.

Slide 8: The Setting. The city of Oran, a city that actually exists in Algeria, which Camus viewed very negatively. Our setting, of course, is the United States of America.

Slide 9-13: Summaries of Books 1-5.

Slide 14: Insights. Camus describes well the chaos of the pandemic – death, economic devastation, widespread panic. He points out we can never be fully prepared for a pandemic, which “removes the safety bumpers of our lives.” This is an interesting idea, right? That the pandemic takes away our familiar protections, and forces us to look at ourselves more honestly.

Slide 15-16: Characters. In case you have not read the Plague, I’m going to now review the cast of characters and give you a brief plot synopsis. Spoiler alert – you’ll find out some of what happens, although I won’t give away who lives and who dies

Slide 76: The Difference between Tarrou and Rieux

- Tarrou focuses on the plague “within each of us” – we must be constantly vigilant so as not to allow our demons (tendency toward fascism, cowardice, collaboration with evil) to emerge and infect others
- Rieux – just wants to do his job, which is to help people; his motivation is simply solidarity with others

Slide 18

: So What Is This Book Really About?

- Allegory of France under Nazi occupation
- Metaphor of chaos and absurdity in the modern world
- Different ways of reacting to the moral vacuum of modern materialist culture
- How to respond to evil that recurs again and again

Slide 19: Themes

These represent some of the ideas people have found in reading The Plague

- How individuals experience the personal trauma of isolation, illness and death
- The resilience of the human spirit in times of struggle or catastrophe
- The collective overcoming of human suffering
- The resilience, self-help and sacrifice of communities/countries in brutalizing circumstances
- Catastrophe can bring out and highlight the difference between individual self-interest and social responsibility
- Solidarity based on love for our fellow human beings
- Focus is on suffering, hope, and eternal vigilance

Slide 20: What Camus Overlooked

Before I close, I'd like to point out a few things that Camus ignored. Primarily he paid no attention to structural inequalities – his focus was on the individual, not the systemic structure

Slide 21: What Camus Ignored

- Ignores realities of colonial violence and domination
- Arab Revolt: Setif and Guelma massacre 1945
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 - Arab Revolt: Setif and Guelma massacre 1945
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- Crisis is depoliticized, rendered individual;
- The moral economy of colonialism must have been reflected in the impact of the plague, just as the moral economy of unbridled capitalism is reflected in the unequal effects of the pandemic in our own situation

Slide 22: Summary of Critique

Slide 23: Summary –

- What we learn from Camus is the importance of human solidarity in the face of catastrophic suffering
- But what we also learn is that we must extend responsibility and revolt beyond the individual to the societal collective