

## The Apocalyptic Image of the Pandemic: An Eco critical Reading of Albert Camus' the Plague

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes Albert Camus' the Plague (1946) and its criticism of the anthropocentric and capitalist society through the lens of ecocriticism. The novel depicts the imaginary city of Oran, a port in Algeria, where the city environment encounters an unknown problem that ends up hitting the city with a lethal plague. The study is especially informed by the ecocritical ideas of Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty to analyze the outbreak of the pandemic as an ecological crisis. Based on ecocriticism, nature and literature- as a cultural product- are interrelated to the extent that some theorists find nature more of a linguistic and cultural construction than a void space filled with landscapes, animals and plants. Thus, it is assumed that an ecological crisis like the spread of the pandemic is not only affected as a result of human activities in disrupting natural order or ecosystem but equally through his mindset about nature. Also, the present study foregrounds the idea that the understanding of nature, assisted by its representations, determines how we make sense of and deal with the sufferings of the pandemic. Consequently, the literary text here will be examined on the basis of two main questions: (1) How is nature represented in the novel? and (2) How do our environmental images inform our responses to the pandemic? It is noteworthy that Camus' narrative looks upon the environment beyond a setting or a backdrop for the plot. The findings show that in the Plague, there is some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or given implicitly in the text. This makes the fiction classified as an environmental text. This result, regarding the relationship of the natural world with human life in Camus' works, is in accordance with earlier research that has understood his works as the topographical staging of perpetual struggle between the natural universe and the world of humans. However, it does not mean that the narrative offers a homogenous straightforward advocating of nature, but rather a complex view about the environment, including sympathy for the environment as well as examples of distinctions between humans and nonhumans.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, ecological crisis, apocalyptic image, epidemic, The Plague.

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the current coronavirus pandemic, a severe acute respiratory syndrome, sparked a new interest in the study of the plague literature. Just a few years before the spread of the COVID-19 disease, the image of a nuclear war, overpopulation, or depletion of food resources would have seemed more probable choices to threaten life on the planet and accelerate mankind to the end of history. The current pandemic though once more underlined human vulnerability in the face of viruses, microbes, and bacteria ecosystem and invoked the impending image of apocalypse.

### The Plague and the Perception of Crisis

As Crawford (2021) properly asserts in his inclusive book *The Plague and Pestilence in Literature and Art*, the plague literature reminds one of the facts that the epidemic pestilence is a matter of mind as well as a matter of body- as medical science has shown to be. It is also associated with biblical visions of the Millennium Apocalypse as it comes in the book of revelation. Crawford adds that the records, memories, diaries and novels on the Plague and pestilence

teach us the humiliating lesson that, in spite of the progress of civilization, in spite of the apparent growth of humanity, in spite of the development and dissemination of scientific knowledge, human nature is, again and again, reverted to the primitive instincts of savagery in the face of the crushing calamity of the epidemic pestilence. (p. 1)

While the records of the Plague and pestilence in literary discourse bear signification as to how human nature reveals itself at the time of crisis, it also discloses the representations of nature prevalent in literary works. Thus, the present study takes the postmodernist view of nature as its point of departure, that is: “nature as the retro-effect of culture”. It is also assumed that not only culture informs “different modes of construction of nature”, but also “nature|culture feedback|oops other than one-sided cultural constructions|representations of nature” (Herzogenrath, 2009, p. 1). By the same token, the spread of the pandemic, which on the naturalistic explanation level, is considered a disaster with ecological origins, needs to be revised in terms of the makings of the human nature dichotomy.

Now, it is necessary to refer to the methodological framework, which simply discusses human nature relationship i.e. ecocriticism. Glotfelty and Fromm, in their influential anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), define the ecocritical theory generally as “the relationship between literature and the physical environment”, an awareness of the representations of nature in literary texts (p. xix). Ecocriticism raises questions like: How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistently with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of land influence the way we treat it? (p. xix). Glotfelty and Fromm go on with a list of more queries from the text the analytical answers to which clarify the text’s orientation or disorientation with the ecocentric viewpoint.

The spectrum of studies in ecocriticism is wide and diverse; it embraces questions like the following: the representation of nature in work, the role of physical setting in the plot, the values expressed in the work in the backdrop of ecological consciousness, the metaphors of land deployed in the text and how they affect the way we treat the earth, the effects of the environmental crisis on modern literature and so on.

As to Camus's works, Vanborre (2012) finds the value of Camus' writing "in its complexity and originality", richness and its relevancy today; his works continue to fascinate the readers because they raise questions rather than giving lessons or just expressing pessimism. *The Plague* is said to be inspired when he contracted tuberculosis and was spent in France for treatment in the preceding months of Algeria's war of independence. "This separation and the suffocation of being trapped" has probably informed important themes of the novel (pp. 1-3).

*The Plague*, by the same token, delves into the concepts of human nature, morality, God, and fate. It is set in the fictional city of Oran, Algeria, in 194-. The choice of the contemporary setting for a city hit by the Plague especially calls for the imagery of Europe's infamous Black Death and draws a parallel between war-torn France and the Middle-Ages Vichy government (p. 97).

For the moment, the thesis' case studies especially underline the theme of environmental apocalypticism, which itself activates discussions of the presumed sense of seasonality, as defined by the calendar, versus nature's own instability and the idea of nature as an unchanging whole versus its susceptibility to human modifications. More precisely, as Buell (1995) put it, our imagination of phenomena with the natural order, like "sense of place and seasonality", are culturally and historically placed into paradigms that unconsciously steer the way we treat the earth or ecosystem. He states (1995) that "[i]n western culture, the order of nature has been variously imagined as, for example, an economy, a chain or scale of being, a balance, a web, an organism, a mind, a flux, a machine" (p. 280). The tropes are more or less present in the two narratives, and the task of the study is, thus, to define whether the choice of each metaphor by the author either leads to a reinvigoration of perpetuating unchallenged thoughts about nature or calls for a revision of the human nature relationship.

Furthermore, based on ecocritical theory, the mass Death of the vermin on the streets reveals the power of nature. In *The Plague*, the disease that overruns the city of Oran is first signalled by the sick, dying mice coming out of their holes to perish on the grounds or floors, at the foot of the citizens, as if the earth is outpouring a contaminated substance so long imposed on it. Nature cannot bear excessive human consumption and the levied pollution to the city's suburbs. The viruses and bacteria that lead to the Death of the vermin signal the disruption of the ecosystem. Thus, the microscopic system shows the potential to "transform urban life from a centre of power and consumption into a centre for fear and desolation" (Karhan, 2022, p.122).

### **The Place of Nature for Camus**

For Camus, writing is nothing apart from the location. When he relates his childhood memories in Algeria in the preface to a book published in 1958, he speaks of the “environment combining poverty and bright sunlight” as such: “poverty, to start with, never meant unhappiness for me: there was the generosity of sunlight to more than makeup for it”; Camus sees himself situated “halfway between poverty and sunlight”, and the healing force of nature is so much that the sea and sun could overcome it (p. 63). For this Algerian-born writer, happiness used to be found everywhere under the sun: “a land whose natural beauty is almost miraculous afforded a lifetime of repeated moments of ephemeral happiness” (). In *The Stranger* (1942) also, the setting takes on significantly more than presenting a mere backdrop of the plot. The setting, or more precisely, the hero’s environmental imagination, is binding for the narrative. Meursault, who seems scarcely to take an interest in others, even if he is indifferent to his mother’s Death, finds his walk in the country contemplative and enjoyable.

Camus also develops a sense of awareness of the weather and seasons in his writings. Whatever that will take place later in the plots is firstly heralded by changes in the weather, natural order, or environment, preceding to that event. There are places of special predilection for Camus where he “attempts to find himself and feel profoundly, for communing deeply with nature and exulting” (151). In *A Writer’s Topography*, Vanborre and Herbeck (2015) trace Camus’ bonds with nature back to his first novel *La Mort Heureuse* (1937) which was published posthumously. He adds “[i]n this respect, Camus’ works as whole might well be understood as the ever-evolving topographical staging of the struggles between the natural universe and the world of humans” (p. 2).

Providing a list of the Camus’ reflections on places or on the moments where setting progress the narrative is beyond the means of this paper, however, based on Herbeck and Gregoire (2015). It could be said that implications of topography are ever more present not only in Camus’ life, but in the bulk of his philosophical, literary, political and journalistic texts. They even take this issue so far as to say that “*topography*- that is, the land forms and surface features and configurations of places or regions” sits at the heart of Camus’ works (2015, p. 1).

### **The Plague and Ecocriticism**

The ecocritical theory meets apocalypticism in the common point of the work being nature conscious. Apocalypticism is one of the most important issues in ecocritical theory, in a sense, the impending danger of putting some species and natural landscape at the danger of extinction have engendered demands for study ecology and literature in their conjunction. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) claim “[e]ither we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse” (xx). With this in mind, the research aims to find implications of environment as well as the nature representations in *The Plague* to decide if the text holds an anthropocentric or ecocentric view on nature. And in case the later holds, what are the author’s critiques to the anthropocentric view in the text. Here, the nonhuman will be taken

as nature or environment. So, in the first step we try to establish the Plague in relation to the eschatological thinking and next, we will assess the text's approach to that ecological catastrophe-ecocatastrophe- based on Buell's ideas. It is noteworthy that Buell (1995) sees apocalypticism a master trope about nature and brings it under his debate of environmental imagination. But before that, a short overview of the novel.

### **A Short Overview of the Plot**

*The Plague* is set in the coastal city in Algeria called Oran in 1940s. The story starts with Dr. Rieux, the main character, spotting a mouse throwing up blood and dying at his foot in his office building. Gradually hundreds of rats stagger into the open and die. This happens to the citizens' unawareness and while they are overwhelmed in their own everyday lives. Once the dead rats' piles have disturbed the city and stirred up calls for action, the city undergoes few days of silence with no more dying rats. The disaster resumes with the appearance of the first human victims including Dr. Rieux's concierge. The authorities and doctors, who had previously denied the existing of any serious problem, call for urgent action though it is only after the epidemic has ravaged all the city. The contagious disease bears similarities to the most infamous disease which marked The Black Death era in European history, the bubonic Plague and finally, the authorities decide to close the gates and quarantine Oran.

### **Environmental Actualities in "The Plague"**

Epidemics play important role in emerging and vanishing of civilizations, man's attitude toward soul and body as separable, and the association of different animals with diseases and consequently their representation in literature. One of the prominent ecological elements in the plague literature, and this fiction as well, is the representation of the mice. Crawford (2021) states that historical records or biblical accounts of the Plague and pestilence have associated the mice with pestilence as well as famine. The ancient literature, according to him, bounds with examples of the mice and rats as the cause of famine-plague, devastation of crops, and plagues (pp. 20, 21, 26). In his essay "The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History", Benedictow (2004), also declares that "[t]he epidemiology of Plague is inexorably linked to rodent and human ecology. Normally, plague bacteria live in small concentrations in the blood of rodent hosts and in the guts of fleas who feed upon them" (p. 4). He explains that that how the chain of reasons for the disease are set in a train and once the contaminated fleas have bitten and killed the rodents they go to other farm animals and humans as well (p. 4). The same procedure just happens in the chronicle of Dr. Rieux in the novel.

Furthermore, the symptoms of the disease resemble the symptoms of the bubonic Plague which was mainly ascribed to the mice as the cause of the epidemic, including fever, spitting blood (shared between the mice and men), swellings, coughing fits and sometimes convulsive movements. Dr. Rieux visits one of his patients whose symptoms are explained as: "At noon the fever reached its climax. A visceral cough racked the sick man's body and his now was spitting blood. The ganglia had ceased swelling,

but they were still there, like lumps of iron embedded in the joints” (Camus, 1991, p. 238). *The Plague* reinforces the assumption that the mice are the cause of the disease, or at least, in this regard emphasizes the binary of human/animals. Crawford (2021) also affirms the tendency to acknowledge “a direct causal connexion between the morbid swellings and the mice”, while rats and mice were ill distinguished from each other, based on the ancient records of the Plague (p. 22). Thus, it could be said that *The Plague* evokes antipathy with these animals while it links itself simultaneously to ancient and biblical narratives of the Plague to bring in an aura of historicity and realism.

This explanation, however, should not overlook the idea that Camus’s writing is environmentalist. The author clarifies, in closing lines of the text, that people were overwhelmed with joy should not forget that the bacillus microbe is not something which vanishes for ever, it is latent and may ruin the happiness of a joyous city at any moment, which indicates the impending danger of another epidemic as a result ignoring the surroundings.

Another ecological element in the novel which corresponds to old accounts of the Plague is the very fact that the locale is a port city. Again historically, most of the epidemics were breaking out on the sea coasts, first, “among a race of maritime traders and spread from the coast to other inland towns” (Crawford, 2021, p. 22). Therefore, the sea stands as a natural element in the text which both suggests the sea as the probable port of the disease and, as will be later discussed, as purifying agent.

The season change is another environmental element which is proposed in the novel. The author suggests that what is striking about the Oranais people is their viewpoint on things as granted: the communication, transactions, health and at the top of that the ecosystem. *The Plague* starts with a description of the city environment, people’s routine, and the weather vibe which contextualizes the outbreak of the epidemic plague in an urban space which is indifferent to its surroundings. It is April, springtime, however there are rarely signs that indicate this season change in the towns: “The seasons are only discriminated in the sky. All that tells you of spring’s coming is the feel of the air, or the baskets of flowers brought in from the suburbs by the peddlers; it’s a spring cried in the marketplaces” (Camus, 1991, p. 1). This way the narrator foretells mishaps that is about to put the city in trouble through describing the urban environment. The opening chapter of the novel moves on to provide us with information about the town’s weather, changes of seasons, and people’s ordinary lives to establish intimate relationship between people’s lives and environmental conditions.

In the opening lines of the fiction the narrator describes Oran as a coastal city that despite its natural blessings has turned its back to the sea:

Oran is grafted on to a unique landscape, in the center of a bare plateau, ringed with luminous hills and above a perfectly shaped bay. All we regret is the town’s being so disposed that it turns its backs on the bay, with the result that it’s impossible to see the sea, you always have to go to look for it.

Vanborre and Herbeck (2015) also have pinpointed to this error. He explains that the city “despite its potential as a topographically rich space, is not described as such” (p. 188). Geographically, “the city has turned its back on the bay- a physical feature that seems to belie the unconscious routine to which the plague-stricken Oranais cling so strongly” (p. 188). The author refers to the sea a means of alleviating the sufferings of disaster. Several times during the text Dr. Rieux goes for a swimming when he gets tired, disappointed, or confused. In a scene that Dr. Rieux and Tarrou talking about their fellowship, Tarrou suggests Rieux to go to the sea: “Go for a swim. It’s one of these harmless pleasures that even a saint-to-be can indulge in” (Camus, 1991, p. 213)

Therefore, it could be said that the city shows signs of indifference to the surroundings to any new comer, and by indifference the narrator means incongruities between peoples’ lives and the environment. In the first remark the narrator makes about the city, he sets the tone of being dissatisfied with the city: “the town itself, let us admit, is ugly” (Camus 1991, p. 1). Thus, according to the narrator what should make up the unique and specific landscape of the city has been ignored by its people.

The author emphasizes the Oran citizen’s indifference to nature further by describing the locale. He explains that what makes this business center different from other parts of the world is that the town is, for instance, “without pigeons, without any trees or gardens, where you never hear the beat of wings or the rustle of the leaves- a thoroughly negative place, in short [?]”. Even the natural order e.g. seasonality which is one of the prominent narratives about nature is troubled here. The sequence of the seasons which is one of the manifestations of the presence of nature in human live is absent in this town “The seasons are discriminated only in the sky. All that tell you of spring’s coming is the feel of the air, or the basket of flower brought in from the suburbs by the peddlers” (Camus, 1991, p. 5). These descriptions from the city clearly demonstrate the city’s antagonism to its suburbs.

Camus’ expectation for discerning seasons change from evidences in the environment recalls Lawrence Buell’s idea of seasonality which consists of passages in the context of American literary tradition that seek to show the signs of months and seasons free from the hegemony of calendar. He cites from Daniel Peck that “he ‘sought to free himself from the tyranny of chronological time,’ to redefine November for example from ‘a calendrical unit’ to a ‘phenomenological category of thought’” through systematically collecting data of the first appearances of seasonal phenomena with the aim of providing an account of the seasonal changes (1995, p. 228).

### **The Apocalyptic Vision of “The Plague”**

The prevalent vision of Death during the outbreak of the bubonic Plague in the novel evokes the image of apocalypse that typically conceives of nature as cause of suffering or destroyer. Buell (1995) claims that a brief look at the American literary history shows the prevalence of apocalypse in American writing tradition (p. 296). The so called eschatological thinking is also a main biblical theme that finds manifestations in some of the great works of art. The links between the epidemic and apocalypse are almost evident. The ravages of Plague and pestilence resemble in many aspects the end of the world

vision by bringing early and mass Death. In both conditions, the Plague and apocalypse, the manifest cause is seen as God's displeasure. And, the nature is the abode of gods. As to the deadly aspect of the plagues Kōhn (2008) claims that "the human death toll from infectious diseases around the globe exceeds far from hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, landslides and other natural disaster" (p. xiii). Therefore, for the modern man who conceives no power over nature higher than his own, disease and aging are issues that inflict his attitude to themselves.

As to whether the plagues are part of the eschatological human history, Peerbolte (2021) argues that although plagues and diseases do not feature prominently in the book of Revelation, they still exist in certain images which associate the eschatological conditions. They are interpreted as punishment inflicted on human being by an angry God, preceding to the judgment day (p. 75). In *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (2014) also it is said that one of the Christian images of the apocalypse is described as believe in "tribulations for those remaining on earth, during which time the Antichrist gains world dominion, plagues occur, dead are resurrected, Christ turns to Earth ..." (p. 427). Thus, the spread of Plague is one of the features of the end of the world. Apocalypticism is not exclusive to religion paradigm and the modern reader may find the fulfillment of the prophecies bizarre. Yet the apocalyptic narrative has subsisted well into the twenty-first century and secularistic views.

In his book *Environmental Imagination* (1995), Buell discusses metaphors that shape human understanding of nature. Web, machine, economy, and selection (related to Darwin's theory) are the most prominent metaphors of natural order. But, there is another metaphor which is equally important to ecological thinking, and that is apocalypse. "[T]he metaphor of apocalypse is central to ecocriticism's projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web" (p. 285). It is the most powerful master metaphor in ways of imagining environment (Buell, 1995, p. 285 & Garrard, 2004, p. 93).

The importance of the apocalypse trope for the environmentalist and green agenda is to understand whether the apocalyptic narrative tends to "produce its own kind of oppressive entrapment"? it is argued that apocalyptic thinking most often confines imagination and leaves no hope for regeneration. It should be noted that "[t]he anxiety of an impending doom [can] reinforce binaries drawn between humans and the natural world, humans and animals and the distinctions between race, class and gender" ("Nightmarish natures", 2016, pp. 11-12). Consequently, the rhetoric of the environmental apocalypse includes causing alarm "on what is eroding the quality of the environment, or on human behaviours which might catalyze us toward the 'end'" (p. 48).

The ecocritical thinking considers apocalypticism as "inevitably bound up with imagination because it has yet to come into being" (Garrard, 2004, p. 86). This genre is associated with a sense of crisis. In line with this, *The Plague* criticizes the fact that people do not tend to acknowledge both the imminence and seriousness of the impacts of their lifestyle on their environment. More precisely, the Plague reminds the Oranais of their habits and routine activities that have disrupted the natural order and put

the lives of several species in danger of distinction. Camus assents that this is not only the people of Oran who have developed such harmful habits to their surroundings, but all people around the world:

This habits are not peculiar to our town; really all our contemporaries are much the same. Certainly nothing is commoner nowadays than to see people working from morn till night and then proceeding to fritter away at card-tables, in cafes and in small talk what time is left for living. (1991, p. 6)

That way Camus refers to a quality which marks lives of his contemporaries in industrial countries namely, a consumerism that is characteristic of petty bourgeoisie and the middle classes.

It was earlier mentioned that literary apocalypticism, as a genre, is tied with the notion of crisis. Buell (1995) states that “the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of imagination to a sense of crisis” (p. 285). However, it may be our perception of the threat, not the threats themselves, that accelerates environmental problems. Similarly, *The Plague* points to the necessity of taking into account the preservation of nature, or else the threats may loom larger and bring about an actual apocalypse. It is, indeed, people’s disbelief in the imminence of such threat, especially the authorities in municipality and the state offices, that makes the matters worse. The author blames the citizens’ nihilistic living for disrupted communication between human kind and nature; “they don’t eschew simpler pleasures as love-making, sun-bathing, going to the pictures. But ... they reserve these pastimes for Saturday afternoons or Sundays [ ...] they forgather at an hour that never varies, in the cafes, stroll the same boulevard, or take the air in on their balconies” (Camus, 1948, p. 5). The absurd manner in which the Oranais spend time at/by the sea recalls Camus’ depiction of the absurdity of the world in *Myth of Sisyphus*, and that is why Rossi talks of the Plague symbolically as the Plague of absurdity (1958, p. 399).

*The Plague* functions as an of apocalyptic narrative because it suggests that if people do not heed their way of treating nature, they will end up facing grave ecological problems that threatens their lives. As Sankaran (2018) cites from Jonathon Coward the apocalyptic narrative explicitly or implicitly asserts that “[e]ither the status quo must change, or humanity and nature will end. [...] in uncovering this desire or need to change, the implementation of apocalyptic narrative in environmental literature is political” (p. 6). Likewise, *The Plague*, which is the most socialistic work of Camus insists on the need to take measures at the level of public. ... argues that in this novel, compared to *The Outsider*, *The Fall*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* that all of them deal with a single hero, Camus moves from “an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution, ..., it is toward solidarity and participation” (Foley, 2008, p. 51).

## Conclusion

The analysis of the novel from ecocritical point of view provides us with a more responsive and less condescendingly outlook to physical environment and nonhuman in general. It has highlighted the

ecocentric view of the fiction. *The Plague* which was previously interpreted as symbolizing the Nazis occupation of France and the Vichy government era, or perhaps the siege of a city in Algeria by France in colonial time, and by some, as the Plague of absurdity and hopelessness that mark human conditions, this time has been reviewed from the perspective of ecocriticism. The findings stress that the novel shows an awareness of the environment and warns of an impending crisis that threatens both nature and human life on the earth unless people care about their ecosphere. The novel sees the rescue from the epidemic in having social responsibility and developing collective efforts to fight off the crisis. It also insists on the role of apocalyptic narrative on raising awareness of the saliency of environmental issues in the minds of the public and changing the way of living in favour of reaching a sustainable balance between human life and the preservation of the environment.

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