

Tarrou: the Plague's Only Hero

In "The Plague", Albert Camus pits humanity against an unstoppable force of nature: the bubonic plague. He creates a variety of characters who all deal with the plague in their own way, but only Tarrou acts heroically. Rieux comes close to a hero, but he fights the plague because it's expected of him and shows indifference at the end of the book. Besides Rieux and Tarrou, none of the other characters show any heroism or resistance to the plague, except the sanitation squad under Tarrou. Through Tarrou alone, Camus asks the reader how to heroically deal with death. Tarrou also provides an example of heroes who get crushed by fate for defiance. For these reasons, only Tarrou can be considered a hero.

All the characters except Rieux and Tarrou can't be considered heroes. Paneloux believes in sainthood and God, but he offers no resistance to the plague since he believes it was divinely sent. Rambert chooses to run from the problem rather than face it. McCarthy also points out that he neglects his basic duty as a reporter by failing to record anything (109); a duty which Rieux and Tarrou fulfill. Grand produces two sentences and does nothing to fight the plague, which McCarthy interprets as a parody of Rieux's inability to explain the plague (109-10). Cottard wholeheartedly embraces the plague, revels in it, and attempts to profit from it. The rest of the people either waste their time, waiting for the end (the old man spitting on the cats, the bean-counter, etc.) or join the sanitation squad, under Tarrou. Nobody takes a stand and resists death except Rieux and Tarrou.

Rieux and Tarrou do seem to show the same level of heroism. Both resist the plague, both are symbolically cleansed in the river, and both record the events of Oran. Brée thinks that for Rieux "morality is first of all a question of curing people (150)." Rieux fights the plague only because he sees it as his duty, and one has to wonder if he would have done anything if he wasn't a doctor. He views the plague as "a never-ending defeat." Tarrou acts for a more noble purpose: to gain sainthood. (Paneloux might also be considered a hero for this reason, but he doesn't fight the plague as Tarrou does.) He's somewhat like Dwight Towers in "On the Beach", viewing the time before death as a period of grace. G. Picon also points out that Tarrou sacrifices his life, and thus pays more for his heroism than Rieux (Brée 150). By the end of the book Rieux has been reduced to methodically diagnosing patients, while Tarrou has died and supposedly attained sainthood. Tarrou accomplishes his goal, but Rieux hasn't been able to cure everyone of the plague.

What is the plague which Tarrou is fighting? Some see it as a parable for the Occupation (Bloom 107), with Oran being France, the men rebels, and the plague Nazism. If this is so, why does the plague carry off the Catholic priest and M. Othon's son? Austin Fowler (Dep. of English, NY state university) says that the plague is death itself, common to all men. Camus, then, is showing how different people react to death. Through Tarrou, Camus shows how to heroically deal with death. Tarrou falls in with Deucalion and the worms in God's garden as an example of "the cataracts of heaven". Since one of his goals was not to be a carrier of plague, the plague strikes him. Like most of the characters in this chapter, he resists his fate even to his deathbed. Camus shows us that the constant act of resisting, the unwillingness to accept death, makes us saints. Paneloux, for all his religious beliefs, chooses not to fight the plague and misses out on sainthood. Rieux resists not because he hates death but because he's a doctor. He becomes almost indifferent to suffering in his narration and actions, so the plague doesn't "punish" him.

Camus has obviously set Tarrou up to be a hero in the plague. He's the only hero because nobody except Rieux comes close to fighting the plague, and Rieux only acts to fulfill his obligation as a doctor. He's a saint because he resists death and fate and thus attains sainthood. He's a hero because he provides a correct model on how to deal with death. For fighting the plague, he gets symbolically

crushed. Without Tarrou, "The Plague" wouldn't have the hero common to almost all literature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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