

## Communities in Western Classical Plague Literature

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### Abstract

### Review Article

The portrayal of communities in plague literature has become a focal point of post-pandemic literary studies. *The Decameron*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Plague* are seminal Western plague literary works set against the backdrop of plagues in the 14th, 17th, and 20th centuries, respectively, each reflecting different paradigms of community shaped by their respective eras. During the Renaissance, humanism was prevalent, which influenced Boccaccio's *The Decameron* to depict communities grounded in a sense of human compassion. In the 17th century, with the rapid development of capitalism in England, Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* portrays the impact of capitalist expansion on various communities during the Great Plague of London. The devastation of World War II brought significant upheaval to humanity, and the absurdity of modern society presented both challenges and opportunities for the communities in Camus' *The Plague*. These communities not only reflect the diversity of social life in different eras of Western society but also offer insights and lessons for fostering harmony in contemporary human society and building a shared future for humanity on a global scale.

**Keywords:** Plague Literature, *The Decameron*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The Plague*, Community.

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## INTRODUCTION

Plague, which is intricately tied to human life and civilization, has long been a significant theme in Western literature. Plague literature refers to "those works whose themes are connected to contagious or deadly physical diseases, or to illnesses caused by social or psychological factors," and more specifically, to "works that directly reflect the plague or those in which the bubonic plague serves as a central event or primary metaphor" (Hu, 2012). The formal introduction of plague in Western literature occurred in the 13th century. Since then, plague literature has become a prominent topic, with substantial academic research emerging around it. In recent years, with the global impact of COVID-19, plague literature has again become a crucial subject of scholarly discussion.

The term "community" originates from the Latin "communis," meaning "common". Since Plato's "Republic," Western thought has explored the concept of community, but its significant evolution began around the 18th century (Yin, 2016). Sociologists like Tönnies and Anderson provided systematic overviews of community theory in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Tönnies, in his work "Community and Society," defines community as "a lasting and genuine common life" (Tönnies, 2001), emphasizing that communities form naturally through interpersonal interactions and can be categorized into kinship, territorial, and spiritual communities. Within a community, members share binding beliefs and a common will, leading to a "tacit agreement" in their thoughts and actions, which represents the essence of authentic shared living, cohabitation, and cooperative work (Tönnies, 2001).

The existence of communities faces numerous challenges in the context of a pandemic. As Susan Sontag pointed out in *Illness as Metaphor*, when a plague occurs on a large scale, "it signifies a collective disaster, a judgment on the community" (Sontag, 1991). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the plague posed a severe threat to human health, impacting countries around the world. This collective disaster has prompted a profound reflection on the ways in which plagues disrupt communities and the crucial role that communities play in responding to such crises.

*The Decameron*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Plague* explore plagues in different historical

contexts: the 14th-century plague in Florence, the Great Plague of London in 1665, and the fictional plague in the North African Mediterranean city of Oran, respectively. These works are classic Western literature on plagues, showcasing the impact of plagues and associated social issues on communities, as well as the proactive roles of communities in addressing these crises. This paper takes these three classic Western plague literary works as its research focus and, using the community theories of sociologists such as Tönnies as a theoretical framework to analyze the construction and significance of communities in these works.

### **Community under the Thought of Humanism in *The Decameron***

In *The Decameron*, the communities between individuals, between humans and nature, and between humans and religion reflect the humanistic ideals that emphasize human nature. In 14th-century Italy, the Renaissance was emerging, guided by the humanistic thought that affirmed the value and dignity of individuals, emphasized a human-centered, rather than god-centered worldview. Humanists advocated that the purpose of life is to pursue happiness in the present world, champion individual freedom and oppose the superstitious and theological ideas of the Middle Ages. Boccaccio, in *The Decameron*, illustrates that the medieval concept of fate no longer governs all aspects of existence; individuals are becoming the masters of their own destinies and the rulers of the universe (Wang,2013). The communities depicted in *The Decameron*—among people, between humans and nature, and within religious contexts—fully embody the humanistic principles of respecting humanity, valuing nature, and seeking harmonious coexistence among all things.

Firstly, in the face of the collapse of existing kinship, geographical, and spiritual communities, ten young people driven by a shared belief in escaping the plague and pursuing a happy life, establish a community of shared living in a villa outside Florence. In *The Decameron*, the decision of the ten young people to leave Florence serves not so much as a means for the protagonists to escape the epidemic, but rather as a narrative device for the author to create a community founded on humanist values such as honesty and kindness, thus laying the groundwork for civilization to return to its rightful course (Ha,2021).

Boccaccio sharply depicts the interpersonal disaster caused by the plague in his work. Initially, it conveys a sense of absolute chaos—family members are separated, neighbors lose contact, and friends become estranged. Traditional kinship, geographical, and spiritual communities are shattered. "Our city was plunged into such profound suffering and turmoil." "The fact is, many of those who fell ill were scattered everywhere. These individuals, once models of healthy living, were abandoned in their sickness, left to die in

solitude." "Not to mention that people avoided one another; neighbors did not care for each other, and even relatives rarely visited. The plague frightened everyone so much that brothers, sisters, uncles, nephews, and even spouses neglected one another. Most shocking and hard to believe was that parents avoided caring for or visiting their children, as though they were not their own offspring"(Boccaccio,2013).

Tönnies argues that the formation of a community is based on the presence of a mutually consistent "common understanding" among its members. This "common understanding" is a "tacit agreement" that cannot be artificially created, and it forms and develops through language (Tönnies,2001). Unlike the disintegrating traditional communities depicted in his works, the shared and binding ideal of living a healthy and joyful life in a countryside villa, away from the plague, became the unifying belief for the ten young aristocrats. This belief constituted the "tacit agreement" or common will of the community they formed. It was this "tacit agreement" that brought them together and enabled them to live collectively in a lasting and meaningful way during the pandemic.

In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio, through the character Pampinea, reveals the plight of the people of Florence during the plague: the loss of loved ones, the breakdown of law, and the abandonment of moral and religious codes—thus, escape becomes a rational choice. "Therefore, if you agree, we might as well instruct our maids to bring the necessary items and accompany us. Today we will stay at one villa, and tomorrow we will move to another, enjoying ourselves as much as these days allow. I believe we should do this to preserve ourselves. As long as death does not find us, we can only hope that Providence will take care of the situation for us."(Boccaccio,2013) This proposal was met with unanimous approval by the other young aristocrats. "Upon hearing Pampinea's words, not only did everyone praise her wisdom and express willingness to follow her suggestion, but they also began discussing the details of its implementation, as if ready to set off immediately."(Boccaccio,2013) Under Pampinea's call, the ten youths clarified their shared intention to retreat to the countryside, and escaping the city to avoid the plague became their tacitly agreed-upon common belief. The communal life of freedom and joy they pursued is a powerful manifestation of humanist ideals, emphasizing respect for human nature and the pursuit of happiness in real life.

Secondly, the ten young people's decision to flee the city for the countryside also reflects a yearning for a community in which humans and nature coexist harmoniously. During the Renaissance, the organic view of nature regarded the natural world as a living, rational organism. This perspective sanctified life, advocated for the equality of all living creatures, and opposed human domination and exploitation of nature, promoting instead

peaceful coexistence between humans and the natural world. The human-nature community is essential for the healthy development of human society, and this harmonious relationship between humans and nature is a distinctive feature of early Renaissance humanism. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio emphasizes that the ethical relationship of harmony between humans and nature is a prerequisite for the healthy development of society. Only by drawing inspiration and strength from nature can individuals awaken their free spirit, unleashing boundless wisdom and creativity. The natural world is inherently beautiful, and human nature is worthy of celebration. Humanity can only maintain vitality by embracing, integrating with, and living in harmony with nature (Du,2013).

The ten young men and women in *The Decameron* live joyfully in an idyllic rural environment, embracing both freedom and a healthy, positive lifestyle. They intentionally distance themselves from the plague-ravaged city, choosing instead to immerse themselves in nature. By doing so, they cast aside the pain and fear that had gripped the urban environment and adopt a harmonious, natural way of life. This decision allows them to live in alignment with nature, where both humans and the environment follow an unspoken and consistent order (Boccaccio,2013). Through this, they form a community based on mutual harmony and respect for the natural world.

Before fleeing the city, those who remained were trapped in an oppressive and bleak urban setting, where the effects of the plague were inescapable. The air was thick with the stench of corpses, the sick, and the overpowering smell of medicine. The city was blanketed in a suffocating atmosphere of despair, with no escape from the reminders of death and disease. In stark contrast, the environment outside the city offered a completely different experience. The countryside, bathed in sunlight and filled with blooming wildflowers, provided a sense of cool, refreshing serenity. Lush greenery lined the roadsides, creating a peaceful, almost otherworldly atmosphere compared to the grim reality of the city.

The villa where the young men and women find refuge is a place of beauty and calm. It represents a retreat from the horrors of the city and a space where they can live in harmony with nature. The villa's courtyard is described as spacious, beautiful, and tastefully arranged, offering an ideal setting for relaxation and contemplation. As Boccaccio writes, "The location was on a small hill, a distance from the main roads in every direction, and the hill was covered with lush greenery, which refreshed the eyes." This description highlights the stark contrast between the suffocating atmosphere of the city and the open, refreshing space of the countryside. The young men and women find themselves in a place where they are free to wander the gardens and lawns,

enjoying the beauty of their surroundings at will(Boccaccio,2013).

Their daily routine reflects the tranquility of their new environment. They maintain a balanced lifestyle, centered on the simple pleasures of nature and companionship. Their harmonious coexistence with nature is further emphasized by their schedule, which is designed to maximize their enjoyment of the outdoors. For example, they agree to gather for meals when the morning prayer bells ring, ensuring that they can dine together while the weather is still cool. This careful attention to timing and nature reflects their deep respect for the natural rhythms of life and their desire to live in harmony with the world around them.

This idyllic community, where the young people live in harmony with nature, symbolizes a profound respect for the natural order. It is a powerful manifestation of humanist thought, which places great emphasis on the individual's connection to nature and the inherent value of life. By fleeing the city and embracing a rural lifestyle, the young men and women reject the chaos and disorder of the plague-ravaged urban environment in favor of a simpler, more natural existence. In doing so, they align themselves with the humanist belief that humans, when free from the constraints of societal structures and fears, can thrive in a state of harmony with the world around them (Boccaccio,2013).

In this way, the young people's retreat to the countryside is not merely an escape from the physical dangers of the plague but also a philosophical choice. It represents a return to natural laws and a rejection of the fear and despair that had consumed the city. Their community of harmonious coexistence with nature serves as an idealized vision of life, where humans can live freely and joyfully when they respect and align themselves with the natural world. This vision, deeply rooted in humanist thought, underscores the importance of living in balance with nature, fostering both physical well-being and spiritual fulfillment.

Moreover, in the stories told alternately by the ten young men and women, Boccaccio outlines several communities characterized by a humanistic relationship between individuals and religion. Unlike the corruption of the feudal Catholic Church, humanists praised the greatness of life, celebrated the value of human existence, and advocated for human dignity. They emphasized the importance of knowledge and the holistic development of individuals, focusing on affirming human beings, acknowledging human nature, and advocating for the liberation of people from the constraints of religion. During the early Renaissance, the idea that believers could communicate directly with God began to challenge the authority of the old Catholic Church, altering the spiritual community's religious meaning. With the emergence of capitalist relations, the

rising bourgeoisie consciously employed "humanism" to oppose medieval asceticism and feudalism, using human desires to counter divine authority.

In the first story, Panfilo recounts the tale of Ser Ciappelletto, who made a false confession on his deathbed. Despite his sinful life, he was posthumously venerated as a saint. Panfilo remarks, "Although we mistakenly regard God's enemies as saints and pray to God through them, God still treats them as friends, listens to our prayers, and grants our requests." He further states, "God only cares about the purity of our faith, not about our ignorance"(Boccaccio,2013). Here, Boccaccio uses Ser Ciappelletto to criticize the Catholic Church of his time, suggesting that the Church does not consist of God's most devout and sacred followers. True communion with God requires only the purity of an individual's faith, thus affirming the role of human agency. This spiritual community of direct communication between individuals and God is established through the believers' faith and recognition of God. In subsequent stories told by Neifile and others, religious communities with a humanist spirit at their core are similarly depicted.

### **Community in the Development of Capitalism in *A Journal of the Plague Year***

Unlike *The Decameron*, which reflects early Renaissance humanist thought, *A Journal of the Plague Year* portrays the social landscape of London during the Great Plague of 1665, with a focus on the development of capitalist society. After the Renaissance, Western Europe experienced the rise of capitalist economic relations, and the accompanying Reformation further liberated people's minds. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the rapid development of capitalism, alongside political revolutions, fueled the growth of Western capitalist society. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe's depiction of communities reveals various social issues faced by capitalist society during the plague and highlights its development. Differences in class, wealth, and social status resulted in distinct responses to the plague, with different communities experiencing vastly different fates. The social contradictions of capitalism become starkly apparent (Cui & Chen,2021). Despite the plague, the emerging middle class defended their communities grounded in wealth, freedom, and reason. As the state's governance structure improved, it played a vital role in maintaining the stability of its biopolitical community during the crisis.

From an individual perspective, although the plague impacted all communities indiscriminately, the wealthy and those of high social standing were better positioned to maintain the stability of their communities, while the poor struggled to do so. This sharp contrast highlights the vast wealth disparities and class divisions that arose with capitalism's development. As described in the text, "the nobility and the upper class fled the city's

West End in droves, accompanied by their families and servants, behaving quite extraordinarily"(Defoe,2001). While commoners were still oblivious to the danger, the nobility, the wealthy, and some bishops had already fled the city in carriages, following the court in its exodus. Even those members of the upper class who remained in the city could respond to the outbreak relatively calmly. They had enough wealth to stockpile food and wine, sending servants to high-risk areas to purchase supplies, allowing many of them to survive the catastrophe. The wealthy, thus, could weather the disaster without fear for their lives, ensuring the stability of their family-based communities. It is foreseeable that when the plague ended, they would return to their homes, restoring their relationships with neighbors and friends, and maintaining the stability of their geographical and spiritual communities.

In contrast, the lower classes were not so fortunate. The poor lacked the capital needed to protect themselves from the plague. They were unable to safeguard their health or that of their loved ones, leading to mass deaths and devastating their family-based communities. Dismissed servants and unemployed workers were left homeless in the city and had no savings to fall back on. They were forced to accept new jobs, such as guards for those under quarantine, nurses for the sick, inspectors of plague-infested houses, or bearers of the dead. Once infected, they were often left isolated in houses by their employers, with few surviving such isolation (Defoe,2001). As a result, the communities of the poor disintegrated under the onslaught of the plague. Despite their difficulty in defending their communities, the poor made great efforts to resist. Defoe devotes extensive passages, written from a divine perspective, to the story of a baker, a shipwright, and a carpenter who led a group of poor people out of the city, built shelters in the countryside, and miraculously survived. Their shared belief in survival reflects the lower classes' desperate struggle for life and freedom, serving as a hopeful wish from the author for the unfortunate poor.

For the emerging middle class during the 17th century, the plague posed a profound threat not only to their physical well-being but also to the core values that defined their identity—wealth, reason, and freedom. These values were deeply intertwined with the rise of capitalist economics and the establishment of bourgeois governance, which shaped their community. The middle class, especially merchants and tradespeople, had worked hard to accumulate wealth, property, and status in a society increasingly driven by commerce. As a result, when the plague ravaged London, it was not only a public health crisis but also an existential threat to the economic stability and social aspirations of this burgeoning class.

In this context, protecting one's business interests became a central concern for many. The growth of trade and capitalism meant that for merchants,

artisans, and shopkeepers, fleeing from the city to avoid the plague was not just a matter of personal survival but also a potential financial disaster. The economy depended heavily on the presence and activity of these individuals, and their departure could lead to significant losses. Leaving behind businesses, shops, and goods risked eroding the financial foundations they had painstakingly built. As members of the middle class, they were bound by their economic interests, and the plague forced them to make difficult decisions about what they valued most—life or livelihood (Defoe,2001).

In Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the character H.F. embodies this tension between personal safety and economic responsibility. His brother repeatedly urges him to flee London to escape the contagion, warning of the dangers that staying in the city posed to his life. However, H.F. resists this advice, revealing the mindset of many in the emerging middle class. His decision to remain in London is motivated by his deep attachment to his business and the wealth it represents. As he explains, "My business and my shop are no small matter," referring to his trade, goods, warehouse, house, and servants as "all I have in the world." For H.F., his business is not just a source of income but the culmination of his life's work, a reflection of his status, independence, and identity (Defoe,2001).

H.F.'s dilemma illustrates a broader reality for the middle class: to leave the plague behind and seek safety would mean abandoning everything they had worked for. The economic communities they had built were at risk of collapsing if they were not actively managed, especially in a time of crisis. Yet, staying to safeguard their wealth and property meant exposing themselves to the deadly disease. In H.F.'s case, he ultimately decides that maintaining his business and economic standing is more important than his personal survival, choosing to remain in London and "manage his business as usual" during the height of the plague (Defoe, 2001).

This decision reflects a key aspect of the emerging middle class's mentality: the belief that economic stability and the preservation of wealth were worth significant personal risk. Defoe, through H.F.'s character, highlights the lengths to which members of this class would go to defend their economic communities, even in the face of a devastating public health crisis. The plague tested not only their resolve but also the values they held dear, and for many, the protection of wealth and status outweighed the instinct for self-preservation.

In the broader context of capitalist development, this episode illustrates how the middle class prioritized the maintenance of economic structures that underpinned their social standing. Their determination to continue business as usual, despite the dangers, underscores the growing importance of

commerce and trade in shaping individual identity and community cohesion during times of crisis. For H.F. and others like him, the plague was not just a test of survival, but also a test of their commitment to the values of wealth and economic independence that had come to define their emerging class.

At the state level, the development of Western capitalism played a crucial role in refining governance systems, allowing for more effective public management measures in response to crises like the plague. In 17th century London, the government's ability to enforce quarantine, control movement, and manage resources was a reflection of this growing sophistication in governance. These measures were critical in stabilizing the city's social fabric, which was under tremendous pressure from the epidemic. Without such intervention, the social cohesion that held the community together could have unraveled completely in the face of widespread fear and uncertainty.

Zygmunt Bauman's observation that the "naturalness" of common understanding is based on shared experiences and homogeneity is particularly relevant in this context. Bauman argues that communities rely on a sense of commonality to maintain social order and unity. However, when crises like the plague disrupt these shared conditions, this commonality quickly erodes, leading to a crisis of identity and belonging. The once-clear distinction between "us" and "them" begins to blur, as people from different social strata are forced into closer proximity under dire circumstances (Bauman, 2003). This disruption to the social fabric exposes the fragility of the boundaries that typically maintain order within a community.

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe vividly illustrates how the plague shattered the peace and stability of London's social community. The outbreak of the disease caused a breakdown in the social cohesion that had previously united the city. Before the plague, London had a relatively stable social structure, where the wealthy and powerful held positions of influence while the poor occupied the lower rungs of society. However, the plague threw this delicate balance into chaos. The aristocracy, having the means and resources to flee the city, sought refuge in the countryside, leaving the urban poor to fend for themselves in the midst of the epidemic.

This mass exodus of the upper classes not only highlighted the stark divide between the rich and the poor but also accelerated the collapse of the existing social structure. As the wealthier segments of society left, those who remained in London—primarily the working class and the poor—were left to face the full brunt of the disease. Unable to afford escape, they were left behind to suffer, and many died in large numbers, further destabilizing the city's population and social order. Defoe portrays how the city's sense of community was fractured as fear and death spread rapidly, erasing the distinctions

between social classes in a grim, leveling force. In the face of the plague, no one was truly safe, and the once-clear boundaries between different social groups became less distinct.

This alteration in the social structure led to widespread unrest. The established hierarchy of London was disrupted as the upper class abandoned their roles as leaders and protectors of the community. This left a power vacuum, exacerbating the sense of chaos and instability. Without the guiding hand of the aristocracy, the lower classes were left to manage the crisis on their own, often leading to an increase in crime, disorder, and general social disarray. The plague exposed the weaknesses in London's social and political structures, threatening the stability of the entire community.

Ultimately, the plague tested London's capacity to maintain its social cohesion under extreme duress. The government's public management measures were vital in preventing complete collapse, but the crisis revealed the deep-seated inequalities and fragility within the social order. The flight of the wealthy from the city, the mass deaths of the poor, and the breakdown of established norms all point to the delicate balance that holds communities together in times of peace. When that balance is disrupted by an external threat like the plague, the social fabric can quickly unravel, leaving chaos and instability in its wake. Thus, the plague not only threatened the physical health of London's citizens but also the very foundations of its social community, making effective governance and collective action all the more critical.

Defoe describes how the "essential elements of civilization—culture, cities, government—disintegrated and reassembled" in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (James, 2013). He recognized that overcoming the plague was, in essence, a process of restoring order, correcting deviations, and rebuilding social consensus (Hu, 2019). Without a doubt, public administration played a decisive role in this. The weekly publication of "Bills of Mortality" by the London authorities and government regulation of essential goods transactions are examples of positive public management. These measures allowed Londoners to construct what Derrida calls a "community of autoimmunity" (Derrida, 2005). As Bauman suggests, all consistency and commonality require artificial construction, and even after the "disintegration" of a community, it can be reconstructed through human participation (Wang, 2021). Government intervention through public management during the plague helped Londoners build their community of self-immunity, ultimately enabling the city's social community to be reborn from the devastation.

### Community in the Atmosphere of Absurdism in *The Plague*

*The Plague* is a Nobel Prize-winning work by French philosopher and writer Albert Camus. It tells the story of the people of Oran, led by Dr. Rieux, who face the sudden outbreak of plague and the threat of death. Initially, they respond with doubt and panic, but eventually, they join forces to fight the epidemic as a community, confronting the disaster together and ultimately achieving victory. Unlike *The Decameron*, created during the early period of humanism, and *A Journal of the Plague Year*, written during the rapid development of capitalist economies, Camus wrote *The Plague* at a time when fascism was on the rise. The two world wars and the success of the Russian October Revolution led Western society to experience unprecedented political, economic, cultural, and religious anxiety. At the beginning of *The Plague*, Camus quotes a sentence from *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe to establish the work's symbolic and allegorical significance: "to portray one kind of imprisonment by portraying another; to use a fictitious story to tell a true one, both of which are valid." Here, Camus uses the plague as a metaphor for life under fascism, and from his philosophical perspective, he expresses a profound and universal feeling about human destiny: the absurdity of the human condition. This absurdity causes the breakdown of the community between loved ones and friends, as well as the entire human destiny, thus necessitating collective resistance through the community.

In Albert Camus's *The Plague*, the pervasive theme of "absurdity" is starkly embodied in the survival crisis faced by the people of Oran, the psychological torment they endure, and the gradual breakdown of their once-shared sense of fate. The absurdity that Camus explores is not only the meaningless suffering inflicted by the plague but also the overwhelming realization that, in the face of such an indifferent force, human efforts to resist or find meaning are often futile. As the plague sweeps through Oran, the community is forced to confront the brutal reality of their powerlessness, which shatters their social and emotional connections, leaving individuals isolated both physically and mentally.

At the beginning of the epidemic, there is a flicker of hope when a serum is shipped from France, supposedly capable of treating the disease. However, when it proves ineffective against the plague in Oran, this hope is quickly extinguished. Without a cure or any reliable treatment, the city's residents are left to grapple with the inevitability of death. Tens of thousands are infected, and the stark realization that they are essentially waiting to die sets in. This sense of helplessness pervades the city, as people can do nothing but watch as their loved ones, neighbors, and friends succumb to the disease, one after another. The plague's relentless spread severs the social bonds that once united families, friends, and communities. As more individuals fall ill and perish, the

ties of kinship and friendship that form the foundation of human relationships begin to unravel, replaced by an overwhelming sense of despair and alienation.

The epidemic's emotional toll on the residents of Oran is equally devastating. As the plague isolates individuals, both physically and emotionally, the people of Oran become trapped in a state of existential loneliness. The separation from their loved ones intensifies their suffering, as they are unable to comfort or even communicate with those who are dying. This forced isolation exacerbates the fear of death that already looms large in their minds. Unable to escape the constant reminders of mortality, their inner worlds begin to crumble under the weight of their fears. The once-bustling city of Oran becomes a desolate landscape, not only in a physical sense but also in the emotional and psychological lives of its inhabitants. This inner desolation mirrors the external devastation brought by the plague, creating an oppressive atmosphere of abandonment and despair.

One of the most profound consequences of the plague's spread is the sense of exile that engulfs the city's residents. As Oran is quarantined, its people are cut off from the outside world, reinforcing the feeling of being trapped in a hopeless situation. The plague transforms the city into a kind of prison, where the inhabitants are exiled from normal life, from human connection, and from any sense of control over their fate. This physical and emotional exile reflects Camus's existential philosophy, where individuals are metaphorically "exiled" in an absurd universe that offers no clear meaning or purpose. In this sense, the plague serves as a powerful symbol of the absurd, an uncontrollable force that highlights the arbitrary and often meaningless nature of human suffering.

As the plague continues to decimate Oran, the social fabric that once held the community together begins to disintegrate. The bonds of shared fate—those ties that connect people through kinship, geographic proximity, and spiritual connection—are all gradually torn apart. The epidemic exposes the fragility of these relationships, showing how easily they can be undermined by fear, death, and isolation. People become increasingly alienated from one another, as the overwhelming presence of death fosters an environment of suspicion and self-preservation. The communal sense of belonging that once defined Oran is eroded, leaving individuals to face the plague—and their own mortality—alone.

The absurdity of the situation ultimately brings into question the very notion of a shared human destiny. Camus's portrayal of Oran's inhabitants suggests that, when faced with an uncontrollable force like the plague, the human desire for solidarity and connection can be overwhelmed by the fear and chaos of survival. The crisis strips away the veneer of social unity, revealing a

deeper existential crisis where individuals must confront the absurdity of their existence. The bonds of family, friendship, and community—all of which are typically seen as sources of strength in times of crisis—are rendered meaningless in the face of an indifferent and merciless plague.

In conclusion, *The Plague* demonstrates how the absurdity of life is magnified during times of extreme crisis. The people of Oran are forced to grapple with their powerlessness, as their social structures collapse and their emotional bonds disintegrate. The plague, as a metaphor for the absurd, challenges the community's belief in a shared fate, highlighting the fragility of human connections and the inevitable isolation of individuals in an uncaring universe. Camus's work thus serves as a profound reflection on the nature of suffering, human resilience, and the existential reality that, in the face of absurdity, meaning and solidarity are tenuous at best.

The crisis brought about by the absurdity not only causes pain to the people of Oran but also sparks their resistance. In *The Stranger*, Camus describes how the realization of the absurd and the sense of absurdity constitutes an awakening for the individual, which he posits as the starting point of his philosophy of absurdity. After this awakening, the path to resolving absurdity lies in rebellion." In *The Plague*, this rebellion against the absurd is embodied in collective resistance. During the height of the plague, "individual fate ceases to exist; only a collective history remains, which is the plague and the shared experiences of everyone"(Camus,1948). In the face of such crises, the necessity for a collective resistance to the absurd fate in order to save the community becomes clear.

First, the people of Oran come together as a community to resist the plague by organizing and mobilizing against the disease. In the face of an uncontrollable epidemic, individual efforts merge into a collective response. Castel, undeterred by the plague's devastating impact, persists in developing a serum that could be effective against the disease in Oran. Simultaneously, Dr. Rieux continues his relentless treatment of infected residents, refusing to give in to despair. Their efforts represent the hope and determination of the medical community in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Others, like Tarrou, Grand, and Rambert, also play crucial roles in this resistance. Recognizing that the fight against the plague cannot be left solely to medical professionals, they take it upon themselves to organize anti-epidemic teams. These groups work tirelessly to provide relief to the stricken, transport the sick, and ensure that proper care is administered where needed. Through their collective cooperation and shared sense of responsibility, the community gradually brings the epidemic under control.

Among the central figures in this community of resistance is Dr. Rieux. His unwavering commitment to treating patients, combined with his medical expertise, makes him a leader by example. His courage and tireless work save countless lives, and his selflessness inspires hope in those around him. Alongside him, Tarrou, a minor civil servant, emerges as another key figure. He abandons his comfortable life to join Grand and others in forming an anti-plague team, fully dedicating himself to the cause. Together, their collective efforts not only resist the disease but ultimately lead to the effective control of the plague.

Furthermore, the collective efforts of the people of Oran to combat the plague not only aim to defeat the physical disease but also to resist the spiritual torment that accompanies it. The long, monotonous battle against the plague weighs heavily on the minds and spirits of the city's residents, draining their emotional resilience. In response to this existential crisis, Dr. Rieux, as Camus's spokesman, and the social activist Tarrou emerge as leaders who inspire others—such as Grand, Rambert, and Father Paneloux—to recognize the importance of rebelling against the mental anguish caused by the absurdity of the plague.

Dr. Rieux's tireless commitment to treating patients is a powerful symbol of human resilience. Day and night, he works without rest, showing through his actions that, regardless of the overwhelming challenges and difficulties, one must never abandon the respect for and protection of life. His determination and bravery earn him the trust and admiration of his patients, but more importantly, they inspire the city's residents to adopt a spirit of defiance against the plague. His actions demonstrate that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering, persistence is key to maintaining one's humanity and dignity.

Father Paneloux, in a different way, offers spiritual solace to the people. As a priest, he works relentlessly to spread the power of faith, encouraging individuals to find comfort and support in their beliefs. Through his sermons and pastoral care, he provides emotional and spiritual fortitude to the residents, helping them cope with the fear and uncertainty brought by the plague. His message suggests that faith can serve as a source of inner strength in times of crisis.

At the same time, Tarrou and others like Grand and Rambert take a more hands-on approach, actively participating in volunteer activities. Their work involves providing practical assistance to those in need, but their efforts also carry a deeper meaning. Through their actions, they convey messages of hope, courage, and solidarity. By coming together to help others, they embody the idea that in the face of disaster, community and mutual support are essential for survival. Their actions foster a sense of shared purpose, intertwining the diverse fates of Oran's residents in a collective struggle.

Ultimately, the perseverance and unity of these individuals weave a rich tapestry of resistance against both the physical and spiritual devastation of the plague. Their prolonged struggle serves as a testament to the power of community, showing how diverse individuals can come together to form a collective front against disaster. Together, they transform their shared suffering into a narrative of human resilience, courage, and defiance, creating a powerful image of what it means to resist the absurdities of life.

Finally, the collective resistance against the plague provides not only physical safety but also spiritual solace for the people of Oran. The isolation and alienation they initially experienced during the outbreak gradually give way to a sense of shared destiny, forming what Camus describes as a "community of fate." As the epidemic spreads uncontrollably, it becomes clear that regardless of one's social status, profession, or personal will, no one can escape its impact. Doctors, civil servants, priests, journalists, and ordinary citizens alike find themselves bound together by the disaster. This shared fate reflects the interdependence of their physical well-being, but it also reveals a deeper connection rooted in mutual emotional and spiritual support.

During the epidemic, the sheer scale of suffering and uncertainty strips away the distinctions between people, replacing individual isolation with a profound sense of collective experience. The fear and unpredictability of the plague create a need for human connection, support, and encouragement. In this time of crisis, people begin to realize that they cannot face the horrors of the epidemic alone. Their shared vulnerability brings them together, fostering a spirit of solidarity and mutual reliance. For many, the simple act of caring for others becomes a way to confront their own fears, and this collective effort leads to a stronger community.

Figures like Dr. Rieux and Tarrou play a central role in inspiring this spirit of resistance. Dr. Rieux, through his relentless treatment of the sick, and Tarrou, through his organization of anti-epidemic teams, demonstrate unwavering belief in the importance of collective action. They refuse to surrender to despair and instead channel their efforts into helping others, embodying selfless devotion. Their actions inspire those around them—friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens—to resist the epidemic not just as individuals but as a united community. Rieux's commitment to saving lives, despite knowing the limits of his medical knowledge, and Tarrou's passionate activism in organizing volunteers highlight the power of shared responsibility. Together, they show that even in the face of overwhelming odds, cooperation and human solidarity can make a meaningful difference.

In such life-and-death moments, the differences that typically separate people—whether based on class, occupation, or personal beliefs—are erased by the shared



experience of suffering. The common destiny that links the inhabitants of Oran offers a profound reinterpretation of human existence and the idea of a “shared human fate.” Camus uses the plague as a metaphor for the broader struggles of life, where individuals must confront their mortality and the absurdity of existence. In the midst of this crisis, the community transcends its divisions and forms a collective identity based on common values of compassion, courage, and endurance.

The author, through this narrative, celebrates the transformative power of collective cooperation. For the first time, we see a shift from individual rebellion to a communal form of resistance and shared passion (Liu, 1992). Camus, who often explored themes of isolation and existential rebellion in his works, introduces a new dimension of solidarity in *The Plague*. The characters' realization that their individual fates are intertwined with those of their neighbors represents a turning point in the narrative. Instead of retreating into themselves, they engage with others, and in doing so, create a powerful example of how communities can respond to crises by uniting around common goals.

Ultimately, the “community of fate” depicted in *The Plague* is not merely a literary construct but also serves as a lesson for real life. It reminds readers that in the face of similar challenges and disasters, be it pandemics or other global crises, humanity must stand together. This idea of a shared destiny encourages us to build stronger bonds, to support one another, and to face uncertainty with courage and solidarity. The novel thus offers a timeless message: in the face of existential threats, the true strength of humanity lies in its capacity to unite and build a future together.

## CONCLUSION

*The Decameron*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Plague* are three classic works of Western plague literature, each set against the backdrop of pandemics in distinct historical contexts. These works not only capture the harrowing impact of pandemics on human life but also explore how communities—whether familial, geographic, or spiritual—respond to the crises brought on by such disasters. At their core, these texts reveal how different intellectual frameworks shaped by their respective eras—humanism during the early Renaissance, the rise of capitalism, and modern absurdism—have influenced the way communities function and respond to existential threats like pandemics. In each case, the communities depicted undergo profound transformations as they are tested by plague, often emerging with new forms of solidarity and resilience.

In *The Decameron*, written by Giovanni Boccaccio in the 14th century, the devastating backdrop is the Black Death that swept through Europe. The narrative focuses on a group of ten individuals who flee

Florence to escape the plague, seeking refuge in the countryside where they pass the time telling stories. While the setting is one of crisis, the work is deeply infused with the humanist values of the early Renaissance. Humanism, which emphasized the value of the individual, personal freedom, and the pursuit of knowledge, is reflected in the structure of the storytelling and the characters' resistance to the social constraints of the time. As feudalism begins to decline, *The Decameron* portrays the possibility of a new kind of community—one based on individual choice and personal interaction rather than hierarchical obligations. The group of storytellers temporarily forms a kinship-based and geographically centered community, where their shared experiences and narratives offer a means of survival and emotional resilience amidst the chaos of the pandemic. Through this, Boccaccio suggests that human ingenuity, art, and social bonds are essential for enduring and overcoming collective crises.

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, written in 1722, takes place during the Great Plague of London in 1665 and offers a markedly different perspective. Here, the focus is on how a developing capitalist society, along with its emerging middle class, responds to the threats posed by the plague. Defoe meticulously documents the social and economic disruptions caused by the epidemic, detailing how communities at the individual, familial, and national levels grapple with fear, uncertainty, and survival. The work provides a vivid account of how capitalist principles, such as trade and individual self-interest, influence the organization and responses of communities. Unlike the humanist vision of *The Decameron*, Defoe's narrative demonstrates how the spread of disease exposes both the fragility and resilience of capitalist societies. Communities are often fractured by the need for self-preservation, yet they are also reshaped through new forms of organization, such as the state's increasing role in managing public health and controlling outbreaks. Defoe illustrates the importance of collective action, even in a society driven by individualism and market forces, underscoring the complex dynamics between social cohesion and economic imperatives during a pandemic.

In *The Plague*, Albert Camus shifts the focus to the mid-20th century, using the fictional town of Oran as the setting for his meditation on existentialism and absurdism. Published in 1947, *The Plague* tells the story of a community grappling with the outbreak of a deadly plague and serves as an allegory for the human condition in the face of an indifferent universe. Camus portrays a world where individuals must confront the absurdity of life and the inevitability of suffering. However, despite this existential despair, the community of Oran gradually forms what Camus refers to as a “community of fate”, in which people, recognizing the shared nature of their struggle, band together in solidarity to fight the epidemic. This sense of collective resistance against the absurd

reflects the broader existential philosophy that, although life may have no inherent meaning, individuals can create meaning through shared experiences and collective action. *The Plague* thus becomes a profound exploration of how, even in the most hopeless circumstances, communities can unite to find purpose and resilience in the face of overwhelming challenges.

These three works, while rooted in different historical contexts, share a common theme: the transformative power of communities in the face of pandemics. Whether driven by humanism, capitalism, or existential absurdism, these communities must navigate not only the physical threat of disease but also the social and philosophical crises that arise from it. In each case, the collective response to the pandemic becomes a means of survival and, ultimately, a way for communities to be reborn. The relevance of these works extends beyond their historical settings, offering valuable insights into how modern societies can address global challenges such as pandemics.

In today's world, where globalization has made pandemics a shared global threat, these literary works emphasize the need for building a "community with a shared future for mankind". Just as the communities in *The Decameron*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, and *The Plague* found strength through collective action and solidarity, so too must modern society come together to confront pandemics and other global crises. The lessons from these classic works suggest that in the face of catastrophe, it is through cooperation, empathy, and shared purpose that humanity can not only survive but emerge stronger and more united.

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