

Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Albert Camus' *The Plague*: A Freudian Approach to the Human Psyche in Crisis

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Abstract

Richard Albert Camus wrote *The Plague* (1947) which depicts how humans respond to disease outbreaks by combining existential content with character, emotional and mental descriptions. This document explores how Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory together with his theories of repression and the unconscious combine with the death drive and superego to explain the deep psychological aspects in characters and their plague experiences. Through analysis the novel demonstrates the plague functions as a symbol that shows unconscious psychological activity among both individuals and community members of Oran. This paper demonstrates how Freudian concepts illuminate psychological aspects of *The Plague* novel through its exploration of Dr. Rieux and Tarrou's behavioral patterns with reference to psychoanalytic elements, stress and morality-related aspects in the novel.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Repression, Unconscious, Death Drive, Morality.

Introduction

Albert Camus creates a philosophical novel which investigates existential matters linked to mankind's pain with the purpose of existence along with the world's absurdity. This novel, set in Oran, explores the psychological development of its protagonists as they navigate a devastating epidemic that spreads throughout the Algerian city. The psychoanalytic perspective along with Freudian theory provides a framework to study the unconscious psychological forces and defensive behaviors during the crisis experienced by individuals and the community throughout *The Plague*. Freud's theoretical concepts about suppression along with death drive (Thanatos) and the superego with the unconscious elements allow interpretation of character emotions and their moral reactions against the plaguing crisis. Through psychoanalytic theory Freud suggests humans display behavioral patterns mainly because of unconscious needs alongside suppressed feelings and fundamental instincts. During the plague outbreak the subconscious elements of individual and social psychology emerge full force while compelling people to face death directly and the suppressed emotions they carry as well as their basic fears. Through Freud's theories this paper examines how characters react psychologically to the plague while decoding their hidden motives as well as depicting existential problems that permeate throughout Camus' narrative.

Literature Review

The psychoanalytic elements of the novel remain understudied when compared to its widespread

philosophical and existentialist assessments. McCarthy (2004) has studied Camus' depiction of absurdism and Cooper (2011) examined moral and ethical conflicts within the story. The psychological elements found within *The Plague* which stem from Freudian thought remain a field not fully examined during analyses of this novel. This paper adds to previous literature connecting Freud's psychoanalysis to literary understanding by analyzing character behavioral patterns using Freudian theory within the novel.

Methods

This paper relies on psychoanalytic analysis of Albert Camus' *The Plague* while focusing on the scholarly work of Sigmund Freud. The analysis examines *The Plague* supplementing it with Freudian theory such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) for death drive (Thanatos) and repression along with *The Ego and the Id* (1923) for structural model of the psyche (id, ego, superego). This research uses detailed text analysis of the psychological behaviors of novel characters faced with the epidemic conditions based on four main elements derived from Freud, suppression techniques and death energy concepts as well as superego functions and unconscious responses.

A theoretical approach aids in exploring the concept with logical reasons. The analysis of psychological aspects in *The Plague* starts with Freud's theory about psychological denial and repression. When the plague emerges in Oran the people along with others facing a crisis behave similarly through general denial and refusal to take the epidemic seriously. According to Freud's repression concept people withhold distressing truths from their conscious recognition through a psychological defense technique. At the start of the epidemic people in Oran firstly avoided taking the disease seriously because they used a psychological shield to promote a false sense of stability which prevented them from understanding actual plague consequences.

This analysis advances to Freud's Death Drive conception (Thanatos) represented through symbolic plague manifestations. Thanatos functions as an unconscious drive which leads people towards suicide and death whereas the novel illustrates this progression during the recurring epidemic. The spreading plague within Oran becomes an expression of death drive which pushes people to face their personal death. Dr. Rieux maintains his lifefight against the plague as an expression of survival instinct (Eros) while recognizing the town faces inevitable demise by the destructive power of the epidemic.

Freud's superego theory represents the final fundamental component of psychoanalytic examination because it describes the internalized force that guides moral choices in human behavior. The characters in *The Plague* follow the direction of their superego that drives them toward moral actions in the midst of overwhelming conditions. Dr. Rieux demonstrates unwavering commitment to serving others because he chooses to prioritize duty over his individual survival as he treats patients and relieves their pain during the entire epidemic. The moral impulse inside individuals reveals the opposition between their instincts to survive and their duty to help others which represents the functioning of the superego. The story's protagonist along with other characters demonstrate how moral decisions face resistance from basic survival instincts because of their internal struggle between superego commands and biological imperatives as a result revealing the complexity of moral choice in times of crisis.

Psychoanalytic Struggles in the Epidemic

At the start of the epidemic Oran's population dealt with the situation through denial followed by repression. Through his concept of repression Freud explains how characters pushed away plague related thoughts during the early pandemic stages when people failed to recognize the danger. Freud defines repression as a defense strategy which pushes unpleasant mental experiences outside the knowledge of awareness. The citizens of Oran maintain a shared denial about the spread of plague due to their unconscious fear of death which leads to their early refusal of action. Mass denial about the disease causes proper action delays which create fake feelings of security that obstruct disease containment efforts.

When the plague reaches its peak stage the characters directly face death which transforms the plague into a form of Freud's death drive. Thanatos represents the unconscious destructive force toward death which causes the plague to spread continuously throughout the town according to Freud. Dr. Rieux symbolizes the constant battle between living forces (Eros) and killing instincts (Thanatos) because he dedicates himself to treating victims throughout the fatal epidemic. The way he fights the plague shows the basic human battle between our survival instinct and our uncontrollable fate toward death.

Through the character of Tarrou the novel shows the death drive as he joins the plague fight even though

he recognizes the actions are pointless. By facing the plague Tarrou demonstrates his allegiance to the death drive and his commitment to moral duty during circumstances of certain death. His knowledge of death drives his actions because according to Freud people are urged to seek destruction in multiple ways including selfless sacrifice and confronting their vulnerable human nature directly.

The principle notion of superego governs the moral choices of human characters throughout *The Plague* according to Freudian concepts. The internalization of morals through the superego functions as a system which directs behaviors against the desires of the id. Although Dr. Rieux understands his medical condition to be mortal and untreatable chooses to stay working as a physician. The moral strength of the superego becomes evident as Dr. Rieux maintains patient treatment responsibilities because death awaits his patients inevitably. Dr. Rieux demonstrates Freud's view that a strong superego motivates people to pursue moral behavior despite endangering their life.

The characters' behaviors regarding plague containment regulations demonstrate the strongest conflict between their superego and id aspects. At the outset of the epidemic numerous influential figures along with others chose to deny the severe gravity of the outbreak while trying to sustain the existing system despite facing the horrifying truth about the situation. When the plague intensifies into a deadly force the characters have no choice but to face both their hidden fears and their impending death and the communal need to act. The novel demonstrates humans' fight between their basic need for survival and internal ethical directives that direct their actions according to the superego.

The citizens of Oran express unconscious elements as described by Freud through their collective social attitudes. The town residents deny the dangerous scope of the illness by carrying on with regular activities despite the spreading epidemic. The people choose to ignore their underlying anxiety because they want to preserve a sense of normality which shows their unconscious processes at work. Oran displayed unconscious behavior when its residents did not respond to the epidemic until a late period.

Conclusion

The Plague by Albert Camus presents multiple existential and psychoanalytic elements for complex analysis. A psychoanalytic evaluation of the novel using Freud's theory exposes three essential psychological elements, suppressed thoughts, desires and the unconscious need for destruction and the main character's internal conflict with his ethical sense. Through plague symbolism the novel demonstrates unconscious drivers which manipulate human conduct leading individuals to face both death awareness and the need to survive and their ethical duties. The narrative examines the disturbed human psyche through its study of psychological forces including blocking of thoughts and aggressive urges alongside the inner moral center. Analyzing the psychic forces driving character choices using Freud's concepts enables readers to recognize how unconscious elements within *The Plague* help people and communities deal with their life challenges during hard times.

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