The Plague is the story of a group of people, defined by their gathering together and resilience against the virus. It parallels the courage, fear, and hesitation that we read and hear in numerous stories about today’s efforts to curtail and confront COVID-19. Through its narrator, Dr. Rieux, we can identify the thousands of doctors, nurses, and frontline workers, in cities big and small, who feared the worst, missed their families while self-isolating, and worked furiously to save lives during the contamination peak; and those such as Dr. Li Wenliang, the Chinese doctor, silenced after warning of the outbreak, and who has subsequently died.

Today, The Plague can also tell the story of a different kind of scourge: that of a destructive, hyper-materialist world in which people are lost to social injustice and isolation. (For example, the devastating loneliness and staggering death toll of senior residents in long-term care homes during the coronavirus lockdown in Canada and France. Daily newspapers like La Presse and Le Monde decreed a tragedy behind closed doors and reported the failures of the public health system.) In Camus’ novel, the group of people gathered around the epidemic represent humanity’s response to calamity. Each takes a turn to act and tell it, although it is mainly the doctor, Rieux, who battles the pestilence with his work, medicine, the way Camus tried to battle injustices, later fascism, with his words and writing.

But why does The Plague speak so loudly to us now? Camus illustrates a way of abandoning our selfish quest for “harmony” to instead fight for justice and life. Closer to today, Oscar de Profundis (2016), an apocalyptic science-fiction novel by Catherine Mavrikakis—an influential contemporary Francophone writer from Québec—examines the overt injustices that separate the rich and the poor in a chaotic Montreal caught in a pandemic around 2050. The plot illustrates two types of characters: Oscar de Profundis, the decadent, the music star who immerses himself in culture, reads Oscar Wilde, is fascinated by Charles Baudelaire’s poem “De Profundis Clamavi” (“From the Depth I Cried”). He sees the catastrophe from far away (he is the prototype of the privileged). On the other hand, Mavrikakis portrays the homeless who cannot afford the lockdown and end up dying in harrowing conditions. This scenario reverberates with what the COVID-19 crisis has revealed in New York, for example, or in Brazil, which reported on June 17, 2020, a national record of nearly 25,000 new coronavirus cases in a 24-hour period.

Mavrikakis’ novel also emphasizes two clashing attitudes: the indifference, the idea that “le monde aille à sa perte” (“the world is going towards its end”), and rebellion and engagement. Are we not all caught between despair and action when facing menace and peril? In different ways, certainly. In an interview Mavrikakis states that “[m]ême si je suis du côté de la résistance, j’ai l’impression d’être une décadente, quand même” (“even if I am on the side of the revolts, I have the feeling that I am a decadent in spite of all”) (La Presse). Not only does Oscar de Profundis, published in 2016, anticipate today’s pandemic and the social inequalities it has triggered (access to medical care vs. death by lack of health insurance; sumptuous confinement of some vs. impoverished people; the privilege of the rich vs. the persecution of the poor in lockdown); the structure of the book weaving Oscar’s luxurious lifestyle in downtown Montreal and the painfully deprived existence of communities in the suburbs, is itself an illuminating tale of shared experiences, uncertainties, and hesitation.

One side-effect of the coronavirus pandemic has been a fresh wave of interest in literary trifles. Sales of Camus’ The Plague have surged as Catherine Camus, the writer’s daughter, has recently told The Guardian. The novel appears to be relevant to today’s readers as they adjust and search for meaning in their uncertain realities. The characters’ brutal hopefulness in the face of illness—both the literal illness and its metaphorical interpretation as the rise of oppression, fascism, the horror of Vichy’s France collaborating in mass murder—gave The Plague political relevance even before the coronavirus crisis. (The novel has resurged during the AIDS epidemic and the Ebola outbreak). However, if Camus’ novel can be read as a distinctive allegory—that of the German occupation of France (1940-1944)—today’s pandemic raises a much more complex challenge: not only decoding what the current crisis stands for (deciphering an allegory), but understanding what the health crisis tells us about our power and violence in a global context. George Floyd’s murder in the United States provoked protests.
COVID-19 lockdowns have surely made the global mood more combustible. Camus’ and Mavrikakis’ novels emphasize historical solidarity in fighting against the plague in Oran and Montréal; today’s protesters around the world, united by the cry that Black Lives Matter, show that the coronavirus pandemic catalyzes much wider calls for action and global conversations. After all, fiction can reconnect us to tragic reality, but reality surpasses fiction.


Adina Balint is Associate Professor of French in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. Her monograph *Imaginaires et représentations littéraires de la mobilité* will be published by Peter Lang in September 2020.

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