“A Matter that Concerned Everybody”: A Philosophical–Literary Exploration of Community and Human Connectedness in Albert Camus’s *The Plague*

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I, Brock Nathan Smith, declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any University.
Abstract

Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague* has typically been read and interpreted either from a philosophical or from a literary perspective. By contrast, this dissertation argues that by examining the complementarity of *The Plague*’s philosophical and literary (specifically narratological) aspects, a richer analysis is achieved, and Camus’s combined preoccupations as both thinker and writer are highlighted. Focusing on the concepts of separateness, separation, collective experience, and the recognition of human connectedness, the narrative’s account of a community’s response to the outbreak of plague provokes philosophical examination. Drawing on the work of Jan Patočka, this dissertation explores how such a crisis forces the townspeople of Oran to question hitherto accepted norms of separateness and individualism. Similarly, an examination of the text’s narratological techniques, particularly its narrative structure and mode of narration, shows how such literary aspects of the novel are inherently an expression of its philosophical concerns. Thus, through understanding the integrated and inseparable nature of the philosophical and the literary in *The Plague*, we gain a deeper appreciation of Camus as a fiction writer and as a thinker.
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The Plague does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared.
—Albert Camus
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Introduction

Since its 1947 publication, Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague* has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Camus’s reputation as both philosopher and writer means that a large volume of the secondary literature and criticism relating to *The Plague* has treated the novel’s philosophical and literary (or, more specifically, narratological) aspects as separate, has viewed one aspect as more important than the other, or has not fully taken into account the inter-relationship between these aspects in Camus’s endeavour. In this dissertation, I aim to show how a complementary approach, incorporating both the philosophical and literary aspects of *The Plague*, can help us to explore some of the novel’s complexities, particularly in relation to the philosophical questions relating to the social phenomenon of separateness, the human experience of separation, and the personal–social dynamic of collective experience (which is present in both the novel’s narrative and its mode of narration). In an open letter to Roland Barthes, concerning the latter’s criticisms of *The Plague*, Camus outlines the recognition of community that is central to the novel, when he remarks that:

Compared to *The Outsider*, *The Plague* does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Outsider* to *The Plague*, it is towards solidarity and participation. (1979 [1955], 220)

In particular, I aim to show that the interwoven nature of the philosophical and narratological dimensions of this novel becomes apparent when exploring *The Plague*’s focus on a community’s shared experience and on matters of individual and collective responsibility raised by such experiences. In this dissertation, I claim that one of the central concerns in *The Plague* is the relationship between the individual and their community. The focus of the dissertation will be to investigate the characters’ challenge to the reduction of community, exemplified by their transition from existential separateness (presented at the opening of the narrative in the atomised experiences of

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1 While in this dissertation I do not comment upon *The Outsider*, Camus’s ideas of revolt, or his evolution as a writer, Jeff Malpas suggests that: “While the works that Camus completed during the late 1930s and early 1940s focus largely on the situation of the individual and their response to absurdity – so that Camus seems to ignore, for instance, the moral issues relating to the murder that occurs in *The Outsider* – the works that come after are much more concerned with the individual as he or she stands in relation to others … in the later works one’s complicity in and response to the death and suffering of others is primary” (2012, 307). As this dissertation aims to show, this individual–other (or personal–social) dynamic is indeed core to and present in *The Plague*. 
individuals, who are focused purely on their private lives), towards the recognition of community and solidarity, which occurs throughout the novel. I will expand this claim to consider how the personal–social dynamic emerging in this relationship is explored not only through the novel’s plot and narrative structure, but also philosophically, through the depiction of the lifestyle of the citizens of Oran. Moreover, I argue that the style of narration itself (presented by the narrator–character of Dr Bernard Rieux who is shown to go to great lengths to conceal his identity before revealing himself at the novel’s conclusion) highlights the individual’s relationship with their community. Rieux, rather than simply narrate his individual story, explicitly constructs his ‘chronicle’, describing the lives and predicaments of the townspeople of Oran, as an attempt to convey the shared suffering and experiences of the community at large. Put differently, I aim to show how the narrative technique is itself an expression (or complementary aspect) of the ideas of communal recognition and collective experience, which occur against the backdrop of the unaddressed social norm of separateness and the rupturing experience of separation.

The Narrative

_The Plague_ is presented as a chronicle written from the perspective of a narrator, Dr Bernard Rieux, who remains nameless until close to the narrative’s conclusion. The chronicle follows the story of a plague breaking out in the Algerian town of Oran. The narrative focuses on a handful of characters and their reactions to the outbreak, yet also addresses the shared experiences of the community as a whole. Set at some point during the 1940s, Oran is a peaceful, if rather boring (according to the narrator), seaside town. Its inhabitants, focused on trade and earning money, carry out their lives in the routine of work and recreation. When not working, they spend their time at the beach, in cafes, or at the cinema. They live what could be called a relatively easy existence. This changes, however, when thousands of dying rats start appearing throughout the town, only to disappear again. From this point on, it is people who start dying – at an exponential rate. Once the authorities declare a state of plague, the townspeople’s situation becomes extreme. As large numbers of its inhabitants continue to die, the gates to the town are closed, and no-one is allowed to leave. Access to the beach, public telephones, and letters are all cut off as well, and thus the town becomes exiled from the rest of the world. The narrative follows the course of the epidemic, focusing mainly on a small number of characters who, in one way or another, are involved with the voluntary health teams, founded by Jean Tarrou. Some of the townspeople try to escape the town,
while some revel in the chaos. Yet the narrative mainly follows those who try to help alleviate the suffering of others – often, at the same time, dealing with their own suffering and separation from their loved ones. After almost a year, the plague abates, having killed thousands (including Tarrou), and the town gates are reopened. In closing the narrative, the narrator describes the town’s celebrations and how some of the townspeople are reunited with their loved ones. The chronicle ends with a reminder that the plague bacillus never actually dies. It lies dormant and may one day return.

While there are other ways to interpret the narrative, in this dissertation I will suggest that in the story, the people of Oran become aware of their pre-existing condition of separateness (resulting from livelihoods dictated by commerce and routine), specifically through the rupturing effects of being separated from their loved ones following the outbreak of plague. This awareness leads members of the community to overcome their previous tendency for solitude and isolation from one another, and to take responsibility for their shared (or common) life as a whole through their actions (the most explicit manifestation of this is through the formation of the voluntary health teams). Thus, the characters reaffirm their existential connectedness, which has been covered over (or forgotten) by the experience of separation and the social habit of separateness. A vital aspect of these notions of separation, separateness, and the recognition of human connectedness is, as described by the narrator, that they were lived through collectively: all in Oran were subjected to the plague and the conditions that it imposed, and they worked through their shared predicament together.

Primary and Secondary Literature Relating to The Plague

In this dissertation, I will outline the connection between recognition of shared experience and communal situatedness (in The Plague’s narrative and mode of narration), with Camus’s personal thoughts on the writer and their community. In doing so, I am attempting to provide an account of these themes and ideas on Camus’s terms. This is to say, by referring predominantly to the primary literature in this essay – the novel itself, Camus’s letter to Barthes, and Camus’s Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech2 – I develop a reading of the novel based on the interwoven themes and ideas introduced above (separateness, separation, recognition of community), which has not been (as far as I am aware) explored in any great depth in the secondary literature on The Plague.

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2 To clarify, this speech is also referred to as Camus’s ‘Banquet Speech’ on the official Nobel Prize website.
support this reading, I refer to the work of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka in my exploration of separation and separateness, as his concepts of the ‘life in balance’ and ‘life in amplitude’ allow us to read the narrative in a different way. Furthermore, by highlighting the similarities between Camus’s and Patočka’s thinking, we are able to interpret The Plague in such a way that allows us to bring to light the novel’s interest in core social aspects of the human condition, as well as the role literature can play in our lives. In other words, by looking to Patočka’s concepts of balance and amplitude (concepts I explain below), and Camus’s Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, I claim that the philosophical ideas presented in The Plague are enriched and concretised by the very mode of narration and narrative style that Camus employs.3

It goes without saying, however, that there are aspects of my argument that have variously been addressed by critics and thinkers in the secondary literature relating to The Plague. The foremost of these is Edwin Moses (1974), whose examination of the narrative technique employed by Camus brings to light numerous significant aspects relating to the novel’s construction, and a consideration of how Camus has positioned the reader to interpret his work. As Moses points out, the subtle complexity of Camus’s chosen mode of narration often leads to its importance going unnoticed: “so thoroughly did his [Camus’s] art conceal art that the novel’s great technical sophistication has not much been recognized” (1974, 429). Much of this concealing is done through the complex narrative method (which some read as being flat, clumsy, or even artless) that Camus employs through the narrator–character of Rieux. In other words, the subtlety of The Plague’s narration (an important aspect of which is Rieux’s self-proclaimed ‘amateurism’ (2009 [1947], 7)) can – if ignored or passed over – lend itself to the view that, as a novel, The Plague is merely a vessel for philosophical ideas or political messages.4 Such a reading, I claim, misinterprets the novel, for it discounts the intimate

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3 Another interesting point of similarity between Camus and Patočka (which I cannot expand upon here) is perhaps their views on the power of literature. According to Marcia Schubauck, “Patočka proposes literature as an existential thinking path insofar as it is capable to account for the ‘phenomenon of different layers … (of existence) in which […] things and events become visible’”, which is to say that through literary work, “existence becomes […] visible as existence” (2015, 308). In other words, literature draws out differing layers, depths, and problems of human existence and makes them visible to us, in ways that we may not have seen before (or that can’t be addressed by other forms or media). Camus’s own thoughts on the role of the writer, put forward in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, are not dissimilar to Patočka’s, albeit with more of a focus on the social aspects of existence and community. For example, D.R. Haggis judges the novel as having a philosophical rather than literary purpose: “the metaphysical preoccupations that underlie Camus’s symbolic treatment of the plague undoubtedly affect his conception and presentation of his characters, and it is by considering the characters in La Peste that we can see most clearly, perhaps, those features of the work that have made some critics hesitate to describe La Peste as a great novel” (1962, 58). The emphasis on the word ‘novel’ alludes to the idea that The Plague in some ways fails certain criteria required for it to be considered ‘great’. Haggis, however,
connection between the literary, narratological conventions and the concepts that Camus
deals with. Following some of Moses’s insight into the technical aspects of *The Plague*’s narration, however, we realise that the narrative’s construction may be read as
dynamically connected to its central theme of community and collective experience.

Some recent theorists and critics have also attempted to highlight the interwoven nature
of *The Plague*’s mode of narration with the novel’s philosophical underpinnings.
Perhaps most notable is David Strömberg, who (following Moses’s insight), claims that
all of the narrative techniques employed by Rieux (objectivity, anonymity, as well as
artlessness, which I do not address here), and Rieux’s subsequent deviation from them,
represents “a dynamic of revising one’s own principles” which “emerges as one of the
novel’s recurrent theme, with characters undergoing extreme hardship modifying the
principles that have guided their conduct” (2014, 82). In other words, Strömberg
explores how a deviation from and revision of one’s principles is the underlying ethical
“message” of *The Plague*, expressed both in the story and in the narrative method
(which he refers to as Rieux’s “narrative ethics” (2014, 82)). Strömberg’s argument,
while not touched on in depth in this dissertation, is important in the way he approaches
*The Plague*; the combined literary and philosophical approach to analysis (in relation to
narrative technique and moral philosophy) has provided some guidance in relation to the
argument I present in the following pages.5

Finally, it is important to note briefly some of the earlier secondary literature relating to
*The Plague* that privileges either (what could loosely be called) the philosophical or the
literary aspects of the novel. A common theme among the secondary literature appears
to focus on the novel’s alleged (philosophical or social) ‘message’, and the relation
between the novel and specific historical events, namely the experiences of the French
during the Nazi occupation of Paris in WW2. According to John Krapp (1999), much of
the negative criticism of the novel stems from the initial responses to *The Plague*

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5 An alternative approach to the novel’s narration (and Rieux as narrator-character) can be found in the
writings of John McCann (2001). McCann claims that Rieux, “is not as objective as he would have us
believe. The truth that he tells is his truth and the novel bears the traces of a battle for truth in which
competing narrators are one by one eliminated. In fact it can be argued that the narrator’s account is
compromised by the ambiguous relationship between himself and the plague” (McCann 2001, 399). In a
similar fashion to Stromberg and Moses, McCann draws attention to Rieux’s reliability as narrator, yet
argues the converse point: that Rieux remains untrustworthy, due to his and Tarrou’s conflicting accounts
of Othon’s son’s death. While I do not have space to address McCann’s argument here, it provides an
interesting point of contrast to some of the more favourable views on Rieux’s character.
offered by Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes. These interpretations are based on the novel’s assumed allegorical nature, and these readings of the novel appear to focus on the appropriateness of Camus’s decision to turn the terror that he and his fellows experienced at the hands of the Germans during Nazi Occupation into terror at the hands of a natural disease: the plague microbe (Krapp 1999). While I do not address this form of criticism at length in this dissertation, it is important to mention these readings, given their lasting influence over, and importance to, the history of critical discussions of *The Plague*.

**Structure of the Dissertation**

Extending the themes of separateness, separation and community, and their relation to Jan Patočka’s concepts of the ‘life in balance’ and ‘life in amplitude’, will comprise chapter one of this dissertation. By examining the narrator’s descriptions of Oran before the epidemic, I will outline the dynamic relation of the concepts of separateness (a pre-existing social condition that relates to Patočka’s notion of the ‘life in balance’) and separation (the suffering experience of being parted from something or someone). I will show how the former concept, unaddressed in the everyday lives of the Oranian people, is brought to light by the rupturing experiences of separation. Once their separateness is recognised, certain members of the Oranian community come together and form the health teams. I will explore how the formation of the health teams represents the characters’ recognition of their shared communal situation and existential connectedness. I will conclude the chapter by a discussion of the responsible actions of the health teams and how these actions gesture towards Patočka’s notion of the ‘life in amplitude’, which is a revolt against separateness and the life in balance.

In chapter two, I examine the narrative techniques employed by Camus in *The Plague*, and I look closely at how the narrator–character of Rieux describes what the community experienced collectively, rather account merely for his own individual experiences. The narrative techniques deployed in the construction of the narrator are based upon principles of anonymity (Rieux does not disclose his identity as the text’s ‘author’ until the narrative’s denouement) and objectivity (Rieux claims to pass over his own personal

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6 The predominant issue involved with reading *The Plague* as an allegory of occupied France, I find, is that it constricts the way we can interpret the problems that Camus is trying to address. Camus’s concerns are broader than the experiences of the Resistance: “I want to express by means of the plague the suffocation from which we all suffered and the atmosphere of threat and exile in which we lived. At the same time, I want to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general” (Camus 1979 [1938-1944], 231).
feelings and thoughts in order to address the experiences shared by all). Nonetheless, throughout the novel, Rieux deviates in different ways from this approach, but still achieves his stated aim, which is to account for the collective experience of the extreme situation that he and his fellows all endured together. In other words, the recognition of community presented in the narrative of *The Plague* is arguably the principle that shapes the construction of its narrative technique. This aim to tell of, and to account for, the experiences shared by the community as a whole, as I argue, is related to Camus’s later thought (his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech delivered 10 years after *The Plague*’s publication) on the role of the writer and their relationship with the community they inhabit.

Finally, I will conclude this dissertation by drawing attention to the different yet related ways in which community is rendered in *The Plague*. By interweaving the notions of solidarity and collective experience, present in both the narrative structure and the mode of narration deployed by Camus, I will highlight the complexity of *The Plague*’s construction. By attempting to understand *The Plague* from a literary–philosophical perspective, I claim that we are better placed to understand the importance of community (and the personal–social dynamic of human connectedness that is often covered over by separateness and the life in balance) as a central concern of Camus’s, both in the novel and in his own sense of the role of the writer in society.
In order to understand community as a central idea in *The Plague*, in this chapter I will present a way of reading the novel as the story of a community coming together when it is threatened by the eruption of the plague, thereby challenging that community’s underlying social norm of separateness. I will concentrate on the formation of the voluntary health teams; this can be read as vital to individual characters’ responsible participation in working through communal problems, including the experience of separation, which affect the community as a whole.

Thus, in this chapter I explore some of the key philosophical ideas that, I propose, can illuminate some of the experiences of characters in *The Plague*. These ideas are separateness, separation, and the recognition of human connectedness at a communal level. I will carry out this investigation in two parts: in the first part, I will unpack my claim concerning separateness as an underlying social norm already present in Oran before the pestilence erupts. Separateness, in short, is a condition of the inhabitants’ preoccupation with commerce and routine. The townspeople are social, but they take for granted their social relations with others and their community, as the narrator makes clear. The routine of their daily lives goes on smoothly, without any existential upheaval, concealing the condition of separateness that underpins their dealings with one another. It is only through the experience of separation, imposed by the authorities upon townspeople after the eruption of the plague, that this underlying separateness is revealed. Here, I propose that Jan Patočka’s notion of the ‘life in balance’ offers a way to understand the notion of separateness (not a conscious experience but a social norm) by juxtaposing it with the townspeople’s conscious experience of separation. Separation between inside and outside of the city walls, created by the closing of the town, is further exacerbated by the introduction of subsequent counter-measures, such as quarantine, exile, and isolation camps. Separation then becomes a defining characteristic of the people’s experience. This new experience of separation leads to a form of suffering that the narrator explores in great depth throughout the novel, and illuminates the need for existential connectedness between people. The suffering experience of separation, I claim, ruptures the everyday routine of commercial enterprise; the people of Oran become suddenly aware of their relationships with others, and eventually, their community.
To explore further the people’s challenge to separation and separateness, in the second part of this chapter, I will concentrate on the section of the narrative dealing with the formation of the health teams (and certain characters’ relationships with them, namely Tarrou and Rambert), which dramatises the recognition of shared communal struggles and the overcoming of both separation and separateness. Despite the pre-existing experience of separateness and the suffering of separation (which becomes, like terror and the realisation of one’s finitude, a problem and an experience shared by all in Oran), some members of the community recognise the shared nature of their predicament and come together to combat it. This rupturing of the everyday (brought about by separation and the plague itself) transforms these characters. I will consider this rupture and its aftermath by illuminating it through Patočka’s notion of the ‘life in amplitude’. The life in amplitude, according to Patočka, is to live in revolt against the life in balance, which attempts to cover over life’s problematicity. The life in amplitude, in opposition to the life in balance, accepts life as being inherently problematic, and sees this problematicity as something that must be worked through. In the case of The Plague, the extreme situation of the epidemic brings the people of Oran to the ‘boundaries of existence’, and some characters – Rambert, Tarrou, and Rieux – choose to inhabit these boundaries, rather than ignore (or cover over) them.

The philosophical questions raised here contribute to the larger thesis in their integration with a discussion of narrative technique (which itself is another aspect of the communal experience) in chapter two. This complementary approach aims to show how a literary–philosophical reading of the novel can enrich our understanding of the complexities that Camus’s narrative presents.

**Part I: Separateness & Separation**

In order to convey a sense of the Oranians’ experiences before and after the plague erupts, I will briefly expand upon the difference between separateness and separation, as well as Patočka’s notions of ‘life in balance’ and ‘life in amplitude’ in relation to my proposed reading of the novel. The notions of separateness and separation are distinct, yet related, concepts. My claim is that, in the fictional town of Oran, separateness between people is an existing condition in the lives of the town’s inhabitants, although perhaps not explicitly realised in their everyday experience. As the narrator describes it, the people of Oran live their separate lives in their individual pursuit of money. Separateness, I suggest, may become apparent to the reader as inherent in the lifestyle of
Oran’s citizens: an underlying yet accepted norm of their daily existence. It is not until the pestilence breaks out and the town gates are closed that the condition of separateness is brought to light and thereby challenged, as the inhabitants realise that their dear ones are suddenly separated from them by physical boundaries. Suddenly separateness – the norm that rules their lives – is made plain, and the townspeople are forced to reconsider their relationships with others and their community. In contrast to separateness, separation is the explicit experience of a person who becomes physically separated from something or someone. Separation, as a form of suffering, is one of the predominant experiences that the characters undergo throughout the narrative (along with terror and fear, which I do not have adequate space to explore in full in this dissertation).

The experience of separation leads the townspeople (and the reader) to reflect on the larger issue of an underlying and mostly unacknowledged separateness that is already present (yet unseen) in the society of Oran. Put differently, once the town is closed and people are forced to remain there with their work disrupted, separated from the rest of the country and from their loved ones (through quarantine), the experience of separation is a rupture of Oran’s everyday routine. This rupture, I propose, reveals the previously concealed underlying social norm of separateness. Patočka’s notion of the ‘life in balance’ addresses some aspects of this underlying notion of separateness, which Camus shows as a defining characteristic of the characters’ everyday lived experience prior to the pestilence. According to Patočka, this experience of rupture can bring the ‘life in balance’, the life of daily routines and habitual functioning, into question by exposing the problematic nature of alienation on which this life is predicated. Only by accepting that life is more than just routine chores, that we alone are responsible for the way we live, can we realise that to live unquestioningly means to live unprepared to deal with problematic situations. Moreover, to live unquestioningly is also to live without grappling with the responsibility, meaning, and value in human connectedness. To put it differently, the separateness that I suggested defines the lives of the inhabitants is the ‘life in balance’. ‘Life in balance’, as Patočka suggests, is an attitude towards life that strives for everyday balance and harmony, yet this striving for unproblematic existence is blind to the problematicity of existence. Human existence is always more than just routinised habits and commerce. It is through the rupture of separation that leads some

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7 Patočka, following Socrates and Plato, refers to experiences like this as realising the chorismos: “the divide between that which is and that which only seems to be, although this seeming originally concealed being and more strongly imposed itself than being did” (2007 [1939], 35-36). This experience, I suggest, can be extended to the rupturing experience that the Oranians undergo throughout The Plague.
members of the community to realise and accept the problematicity of their situation by challenging their own separateness that was part of the town’s pre-existing status quo. Eventually, Rieux, Tarrou, and the volunteers in the health teams take responsibility for their community and the lives of others through their everyday actions. In doing so, these characters realise that there is more to human existence than routine and commercial success; through realising and refuting their shared problem (both the plague and their blindness to the problematicity of existence), they reaffirm human connectedness and community.

**Separateness**

I draw the notion of separateness (as an underlying and unaddressed social norm) from the way in which the narrator (who is finally revealed to be Dr Rieux) introduces the lives of Oran’s inhabitants. The narrator describes the inhabitants and the way they carry out their lives under normal conditions before the plague by presenting, “how people work there, how they love and how they die” (Camus 2009 [1947], 5). The people of Oran appear to rush carelessly through their lives. Work, love, and death, are “done together, with the same frenzied and abstracted air”, because “people are bored … they make an effort to adopt certain habits” (Camus 2009 [1947], 5). As the narrator makes clear, their habits cover over an existential boredom, a condition that may lead to and sustain the alienation between them. In the description of their lifestyle, the narrator emphasises individual routine that fills the passing of the time between birth and death. Their passing of time is characterised by the most peaceful – and least chaotic or disrupted – way possible:

> Our fellow-citizens work a good deal, but always in order to make money. They are especially interested in trade and first of all, as they say, they are engaged in doing business. Naturally, they also enjoy simple pleasures: they love women, the cinema and sea-bathing. But they very sensibly keep these activities for Saturday evening and Sunday, while trying on the other days of the week to earn a lot of money. (Camus 2009 [1947], 5-6)

Defined by work alone for the purpose for acquiring affluence, their lives become routine. While carrying out social activities, the people of Oran organise their time around their work and the acquisition of wealth, which is their main priority; it defines the routine in which they carry out their lives. I suggest, as does Camus, that this routine conceals important facets of human existence, such as love and death. According to Patočka, routine becomes life’s telos to keep it ‘in balance’. To preserve the ‘life in balance’ is to close one’s eyes before the problematicity that is always part and parcel of
the human lot. The people’s routine is, as Patočka defines it, their “fixed centre”, on which “the life of the individual and the society can be leaned upon” (2007 [1939], 37). Following Patočka, we can define this centre as the social foundation based on tradition, around which the community of Oran organises itself. This foundation is formed in order to secure regulated and routinised life so that it can run its course without its citizens having to confront any major existential upheavals.

This routine centre of the Oranian citizen’s life, organised around work, either subsumes other facets of life, such as love, or else excludes them completely, as in the case of sickness and death. As the narrator explains:

Men and women either consume each other rapidly in what is called the act of love, or else enter into a long-lasting, shared routine. Often there is no middle between these two extremes. That, too, is original. In Oran, as elsewhere, for want of time and thought, people have to love each other without knowing it. (Camus 2009 [1947], 6)

The deeper meaning of attachment between people that defines a loving relationship is excluded from their lives, as it lies outside of the centre of economic activity and routine. In Oran, relationships are adapted to a person’s daily routines, thus becoming routines in themselves, without people having any great feeling of affection for one another. Alternatively, romantic relationships consist of seeing the other person only as a thing to be consumed as quickly as possible, without commitment or disruption of one’s established habits. The experience, and importance, of love and attachment is surprisingly absent in the town before the plague erupts; if it is present, it goes unrecognised. Through the neglect of human connectedness, which is a necessary aspect of human existence (of which love is just one example), the close relationship is discarded in favour of money-making, without the townspeople being aware that their lives are defined only in one, rather empty, way. The narrator’s description might also suggest that the other ways in which humans are meaningfully connected, such as through ideas and active practices as members of a community, may also be covered over through the striving for private wealth as life’s predominant aim. This is, I propose, where separateness lies: the inhabitants of Oran are undoubtedly social – as is seen in both their simple pleasures and their relationships; nonetheless, through their attitude toward life, expressed in their lifestyle, the deeper levels of human connectedness are taken for granted and thus ignored.

The townspeople, as described in the novel, live routine lives and their focus on work is an affirmation of their yearning for practical life, not to be disturbed by unexpected
events. This is to say, they arrange their lives around their economic success by and through the establishment of routine. In this way, the unexpected characteristics of life that might shake the townspeople’s everyday raison d’être are concealed before they are encountered or considered in depth. Their understanding of life’s other aspects – love, finitude (which I will turn to shortly), connectedness – is outside of their practical considerations, since they might reveal that life is not a simple unfolding of balanced activities, but also involves bewildering aspects that could disrupt this routine monotony. This pertains to the root of the notion of separateness, as noted above. By excluding the fundamental human aspects of existence – especially love and human connection – the townspeople effectively conceal them. This concealing, I suggest, leads to an unnoticed separateness between people. This concealed separateness is not experienced by the townspeople as something ‘visible’. It is an underlying social norm that mediates the townspeople’s interaction with the world and with others. Another way of putting this would be to say that this separateness – whether the townspeople are aware of it or not – shapes both the situation itself and the townspeople’s understanding of their situation. It is a backdrop that is brought to light – if not apparently to them, then for the reader – when the plague erupts in Oran.

In terms of the town’s standard life of balance and routine, death and sickness – the recognition of one’s and of others’ finitude – also remain to be unexamined aspects of the human condition. Before the plague erupts in Oran, the narrator’s description of the town’s attitude towards death and sickness implies that an ill person is already taken as superfluous to the town’s professional, routinised, lifestyle. Such a person is essentially exiled from the lives of the busy people:

Something more distinctive about our town is how difficult it is to die there. […] It is never pleasant being ill, but there are towns and countries which support you in sickness and where one can, as it were, let oneself go. A sick person needs tenderness, he quite naturally likes to lean on something. But in Oran, the extreme climate, the amount of business going on, the insignificance of the surroundings, the speed with which night falls and the quality of pleasure, all demand good health. A sick person is very lonely here. So just think of one who is about to die, trapped behind hundreds of walls sizzling with heat, while at the same time there all those

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8 David Sprintzen puts it a little differently, saying: “Having cut themselves off from nature and from one another, the citizens of Oran have succeeded in reducing passion and spirit to the habitualized pursuit of material success and physical satisfaction. Care and concern for others, for the quality of the public life, or for the possibilities of human excellence, have simply been lost in the shuffle … Rather than seeking to exhaust the field of the possible’, habit and routine have become the order of the day; propriety its rules and regulations; diversion and leisure its sustaining satisfaction; and material success its aim and crowning achievement.” (1988, 90)
people, on the telephone or in cafes, talking of drafts, of bills of lading and of discounts. You will understand what could be disagreeable about death, even a modern one, when it happens in such a dry place. (Camus 2009 [1947], 6-7)

The sick person is excluded from the life of community in two ways: they are separated not only from comfort and support, but also from everybody else. Work, which was the centre of their lives, is now impossible. Work requires health and they are sick; they are, one could say, overlooked, since they have ceased to participate in the routine around which the rest of townspeople almost exclusively concentrate. In this way, death and sickness have no place within people’s everyday activities and livelihood. Sick people are separated from others and, due to their condition, forgotten.

Life in Oran, before the extreme situation of the plague, is defined by this forgetting. To live is also to live with others so our lives are meaningful in the passage between birth and death. For Patočka, “the average life yearns to be spared the shaking that we seemingly encounter contingently, which signifies a test, loss, pain, which in the program of practical life that is arranged according to plans and aims for successes, signifies sheer deficit” (2007 [1939], 38). As in the novel, a sick person is already lacking the ability to continue in life’s important practical aims. To be sick, in Oran, is to be deficient in terms of the active abilities of healthy, routinised, life. However, as Patočka cautions, the average person, one who is concerned only with practical aims, “yearns for life to be arranged as practical as possible … excluding most of these deficits. This average life does not doubt that its apparent satisfaction is the real fullness of life” (Patočka 2007 [1939], 38). An average person, in other words, closes their eyes at the possibility of sickness and death.

As the narrator makes clear, when the plague eventuates in Oran, these taken-for-granted or unconsidered aspects of life are brought to the forefront of people’s experience, as death and sickness suddenly become the centre of everybody’s life. Human life is suddenly revealed in its finitude. Patočka reminds us of ‘timid finitude’, whereby one “closes [their] eyes before the fact that life is bordered by two chasms, between which there exists a minute enclave of calm like a brief pause” (2007 [1939], 38). Accepting and engaging in daily, uninterrupted routine, we forget our finitude. Ignoring the passage between birth and death, we occupy ourselves with routine tasks and habits. A description of the inhabitants of Oran reveals this forgetting. By investing all their time into routine chores, commerce and simple pleasures, they ignore the meaning of this boundary that defines the human life – human finitude. Patočka says, “it
is possible to close one’s eyes to the nothingness that will someday embrace us completely, and give oneself over to the frenzy of work and activity” (2007 [1939], 37).

Until the plague brings death into the midst of human affairs, the Oranians have excluded all consideration of death from their experience and routinised functioning.

This attitude towards death and sickness, as inherent to the routinisation and separateness characterising the lives of people in the town, defines the way in which the Oranians live. In a sense, these aspects of the town’s lifestyle form the background from which the activities of the health teams spring. When actual separation becomes the new norm of the town, these characters challenge the previous condition of separateness, which is revealed as unsustainable. By choosing to act in the name of and for their fellow-citizens, the members of the health team reveal the importance of finitude and human connectedness, previously concealed by the status quo of commerce, routine, and individual goals (I will explore this transformation further in part two of this chapter). This is not to say, however, that they are the only ones who discover (or rediscover) the importance of others. Once the town gates are closed by the authorities, and throughout the course of the epidemic, the narrator conveys how the people of Oran – in different ways – reconsider their relationships with others.

**Separation**

**Separation**

When the gates to the town close, separation becomes one of the fundamental experiences for the inhabitants of Oran. Guards are placed at the gates, everyone is denied access to the ocean, people are allowed in, but no one is allowed out. Furthermore, letters are banned, as they could potentially spread the plague microbe. Due to their overcrowding, the telephone booths are also closed down, thus making ten-word telegrams the only form of communication available for contacting the outside world. For the inhabitants, their world’s boundaries are therefore restricted to the town, and for the unforeseeable future their lives must be spent within its walls. Separation – in its very concrete manifestation – is not only exile from everybody outside of the town, but also occurs, and is prevalent within, these new boundaries. The rising death toll forces the authorities to open several quarantine camps and auxiliary hospitals, leading to a separation and isolation between the plague victims and their families, who are thus denied the possibility of comforting their loved ones. In this way, the physical separation of the people in Oran from those outside also occurs inside the town itself. These aspects of separation, the pain that the Oranians are now forced to endure, makes
them realise that the familial or romantic relations they once took for granted are no longer there.

As the people of Oran gradually become aware of the gravity of their situation, they begin to resist their condition of separateness by reconsidering their relationships. This new experience, in a subtle way, reveals the importance of connectedness to others. As the narrator explains:

Husbands and lovers who had the greatest confidences in their partners found themselves becoming jealous. Men who thought they were frivolous in love found themselves loyal. Sons, who had lived close to their mothers and barely looked at them, instilled all their anxiety and longing into a line on her face that haunted their memories. (Camus 2009 [1947], 55-56)

The realisation of their own finitude and of the fact that the lives of their loved ones are in danger – as well as the distance that has existed between them – forces the town’s inhabitants to come together, affirming the importance of their relationships. Separateness, as an underlying condition of a previously unaddressed social norm, comes to light as a hindrance in the new situation, and the townspeople become aware of the importance of their loved ones. Yet, this care is restricted to their private lives. It does not necessarily lead to action or concern for the broader community. This is noticeable through the way the townspeople act towards each other over the course of the novel, as the narrator tells us. They are torn between the need for human company – they continue to frequent cafes, bars, cinemas, and theatres – yet they also fear contamination from their fellow citizens. As Tarrou records in his notebooks:

Trams have become the only means of transport and they can hardly move, their footboards and rails loaded to breaking point. An odd thing, however: all the passengers, as far as possible, turn their backs on one another, to avoid infection. At stops, the tram unloads its cargo of men and women, all in a hurry to get away and be on their own. (Camus 2009 [1947], 92)

The townspeople, as Tarrou and the narrator both convey, are torn between the fact that they cannot escape the presence of others, knowing that anyone could potentially harbour and pass on the infection, and their desire (or need) to be in others’ company. This shows that separateness, which had been the abiding social norm of Oran, is not easily or immediately overcome.

While the rupturing effects of the experience of separation forces the Oranians to reconsider the nature of the connection they have with those dear to them, for many it is only in this personal realm that the changes are apparent. The notion of community, and
taking responsibility for the community that they inhabit, is absent from many of the townspeople’s lives and thoughts.

**Part II: Recognition of the Communal Situation & Amplitude**

For a while after the town’s closing, the separateness that has been brought to light (by the extreme situation of pestilence) to the inhabitants of Oran has only been challenged in the private realm. However, there are numerous instances throughout the novel where concern for others translates into communal experience. In this way, the life of balance, the life of small pleasures and routine chores that refuses to accept its contingent character, is disrupted. This disruption, I propose, might be read as hinting at the possibility of what Patočka calls the ‘life in amplitude’. In the novel, the stories of Rieux, Tarrou, and the health teams provide the most visible form of collective protestation against separateness, the plague, and the life in balance. Groups of individuals begin to act to overcome their separateness, isolation, and solitude through their actions.

The accelerating horror of the plague, as well as growing pressure on the overworked doctors, leads some to realise that they all suffer the same condition and that they are all part of the same situation. During the plague, doctors have the impossible task of treating the sickness of a population exceeding 200,000. Thus, the implementation of the voluntary health teams is necessary and yet not mandated by the authorities. The importance of these characters is not that they are heroic, but rather that they do what was required of them as humans. This is to say, they help to ease the suffering of their neighbours and of their community.

The health teams, an initiative founded by Tarrou, are voluntary formations that assist the doctors in carrying out their work at great personal risk: both Tarrou and Othon lose their lives in fighting the plague, and Grand narrowly survives. In describing their role. However, the narrator asserts that the volunteers are not heroes, or people out of the ordinary:

> In reality, it was no great merit on the part of those who dedicated themselves to the health teams, because they knew that it was the only thing to be done and not doing it would have been incredible at the time. The teams helped the townspeople to get further into the plague and to some extent convinced them that, since the disease was here, they had to do whatever needed to be done to overcome it. So, because the plague became the responsibility of some of us, it appeared to be what it really was – a matter that concerned everybody. (Camus 2009 [1947], 101)
The members of the health teams are everyday people who decide to risk their lives to help others. Furthermore, by choosing to fight the plague and by taking responsibility for the lives of others, these health teams both recognise their relationship with their community and overcome the separateness of their condition, but not only in the private sphere, as many have also done. Rather, the volunteers extend the affirmation of human connectedness to their community in distress. The ethic behind the formation of these teams, I propose, is espoused most clearly by Tarrou towards the end of the novel. In a conversation with Rieux on the rooftop terrace above the old asthmatic’s home, Tarrou explains to Rieux:

I was already suffering from the plague long before I knew this town and this epidemic. All this means is that I am like everybody else. But there are people who do not know this or who are happy in this state, and people who know it and would like to escape. I have always wanted to escape. (Camus 2009 [1947], 189)

Tarrou here uses the term ‘plague’ in a metaphorical sense, and is thus talking about something larger in scope than the current situation; furthermore, this metaphorical ‘plague’ is itself related to the idea of human separateness – and its refutation. I propose that what Tarrou means by the plague (in the metaphorical sense) is the acceptance of separateness. In other words, the closing of one’s eyes before suffering and death is built upon separateness between people and the lack of recognition of a humanity that is shared by, and present in, other people. By extension, this is also the failure to understand oneself as part of a community. Tarrou’s reaction to this separateness, and apathy towards death and suffering, is that one must “reject everything that, directly or indirectly, makes people die or justifies others in making them die” (Camus 2009 [1947], 195). Before coming to Oran, Tarrou has identified the abstract view of death inherent in separateness and the life of balance, but by trying to escape this condition and separating himself, he unwittingly has remained under it. It is not until the plague eventuates, and he meets Rieux, that Tarrou realises that the problem must be faced through communal action. He expresses this to Rieux during their conversation on the terrace when he says that, “this epidemic has so far taught me nothing except that it must be fought by your side” (Camus 2009 [1947], 195). After realising his own condition of separateness and the impact of separation, and the importance of actively taking responsibility for his community, inaction in the face of suffering and disease is not an option for Tarrou. As David Sprintzen suggests, for Tarrou at this point, “to

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9 This failure is embodied most prominently in the novel by the character of Cottard, who Tarrou attempts to understand and sympathise with, but ultimately cannot (Camus 2009 [1947], 233).
remain apart, free from involvement, pure, is to be equally guilty of standing idly by while others suffer and die” (1988, 99). This is evident when Tarrou states that, “there are pestilences and there are victims – and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of pestilence” (Camus 2009 [1947], 195). Rather than ignore terror, death, and disease, either explicitly or through inactivity, Tarrou’s position is that one must revolt against these things and support those who suffer from (and because of) them.

The refusal to be on the side of the plague can also be read as a refusal to accept one’s conditions at face value, for it also refutes the life in balance. As a refusal of Oran’s underlying condition of separateness, the act of helping others and coming together in solidarity against a shared problem challenges the self-interest that defines the town’s social life in normal times. It is important to note again, however, that the selflessness of Tarrou and the other volunteers is based in the everyday recognition of, and care for, their community and its members who share the same condition and predicament. As Rieux tells Rambert, “this whole thing is not about heroism. It’s about decency. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency” (Camus 2009 [1947], 125).

The character of Raymond Rambert presents perhaps the most distinct example of the movement from separateness and separation to the recognition of communal experience in the novel. Rambert, a visiting journalist from Paris, chooses to join the health teams despite his original cynicism as to their effectiveness and idea of himself as an outsider. He is also perhaps the most striking example of the concept of separation, for he suffers it in two ways: not only is he separated from his partner, he is also exiled from his home. His original reaction to the outbreak of the plague is to escape the town, and to orchestrate a number of attempts to leave. However, after Tarrou discloses to Rambert the separation that Rieux also suffers (the doctor’s wife is away in a sanitorium outside of Oran) the recognition of Rieux’s situation makes Rambert reconsider his stance towards the health teams and his communal situatedness. The following day he joins the volunteers, reasoning that he is doing so only until he is able to escape from the town. However, when the opportunity does arise for him to flee from Oran, Rambert declines at the last minute; he thinks that he would be ashamed at choosing his own individual happiness over deciding to stay in order to help others. As Rambert explains:

There may be shame in being happy all by oneself … I always thought that I was stranger in this town and had nothing to do with you. But now that I have seen what I
have seen, I know that I come from here, whether I like it or not. This business concerns all of us. (Camus 2009 [1947], 162)

Despite talking about his potential shame, I propose that Rambert’s reason for staying in the town is his recognition of community and the importance of helping others. Shame, in Rambert’s case, would not be public shame; the few people in Oran that know him all support his previous decision to escape. Furthermore, Rambert’s reason for leaving – the desire to be reunited and happy with his partner – is not cowardice. As such, the ‘shame’ that he talks of would only be something that he himself carries, rather than how others view him. Once he has seen the importance of helping others through their shared predicament, he is unable to turn his back on them. He has recognised that he is, in fact, part of the community, and that he cannot extricate himself from the events that are unfolding around him. In short, in the movement from viewing himself as separate to the townspeople, and the enduring separation from what he loves, to his decision to stay and help the community he has become part of, Rambert’s narrative presents the clearest example of the recognition of human connectedness and the value of communal participation in the novel.

Through the boundary situation that the plague brings about, the transformations of Rieux, Tarrou, and Rambert, as well as the others who form the core of the health teams, we can grasp Patočka’s idea of the ‘life in amplitude’. As Patočka writes:

> The philosophy of amplitude is one that is conscious that life must in each moment bear the entire weight of the world and accepts this duty … We experience the life in amplitude when we extricate ourselves from the life in enclave [or the life in balance] and go, as Jaspers says, to the boundaries of our existence. (2007 [1939], 38, italics in original)

These characters, and the choices that they make – the way they live their lives under the conditions of the plague – show a movement from the safety of the everyday ‘security’ of repetition of the same, and routine, towards a rejection of the life in balance. They come to face the boundaries of their situation, their existence, and the existence of others. The plague has made clear these boundaries by revealing to these characters that there is more to life than the search for ‘balance’, which covers over our complicity in routine tasks. In other words, rather than capitulate to the plague, the possibility of impending death, and social isolation (in order to keep themselves safe from infection), Rieux and the volunteers of the health teams accept the problematicity of life and of their situation. They decide to revolt against the condition that has been imposed on them, both socially (the underlying separateness of their community) and
physically (they challenge the possibility of death and sickness on a daily basis through their actions, rather than waiting for or ignoring it). This refusal of the simple balance in life is a key aspect to their life in amplitude, for as Patočka writes:

> Living in amplitude means a test of oneself and a protest. In amplitude, Man is tested by exposing himself to the extreme possibilities that are mere abstract, distant possibilities for the common life, and protests against those that are usual and obvious. (Patočka 2007 [1939], 39, italics in original)

In refusing to accept their situation as hopeless or retreating into routine chores of self-interest, self-preservation, and loneliness, the members of the health teams refuse to accept the separation that the plague made manifest. They accept the extreme possibility of death to help others to live. Moreover, due to the separateness that is inherent in Oran as a social norm, the health teams’ actions are in themselves protests against the tradition of which they are part. Taking responsibility for their community and the lives of others is a decision that lies outside the realm of commercial enterprise and routine. In short, through their everyday actions and determination, the health teams reaffirm the importance of human connection with others and take responsibility for the communal life, while also breaking out of the routine and habitual life of balance. They face the boundaries of human experience – death and sickness – rather than shying away from them, or covering them over with a different routine.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown that the health teams’ actions challenge the habit of separateness at a core level, as these actions show that humans are meaningfully connected, despite the unrecognised connection between them that is concealed by the common sense of the townspeople. Separateness, seemingly inherent in the society of Oran, is shown to be a by-product of the commercially driven routinisation of the townspeople’s lives, rather than an existential fact of it. As we have seen, once the plague erupts, the routine that forms the basis for the common life in Oran is disrupted through the town becoming exiled and its inhabitants separated from their loved ones who are outside its walls. This separation causes the inhabitants to reconsider the importance of the connections that they have with others, but this recognition of familial (or romantic) relations is and remains in the private realm; the underlying condition of

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10 This alternate decision, adhering to traditional ways, remains present in Oran: the common life, as Patočka calls it, manifests in *The Plague* through the actions of townspeople, who wait out the plague in bars and cafes once their routine has been disrupted by the town’s closing – and this becomes a routine of its own.
separateness and routine habits remain as the status quo. As the situation worsens, however, some of the characters carry this reconsideration into the realm of the public, and form the voluntary health teams. These characters realise that their current extreme situation concerns them all, and that they are responsible for its mitigation. By accepting responsibility for the lives of others, and themselves, the members of the health teams challenge their previous condition of separation, and reaffirm the fundamental importance of meaningful human connection through their participation in working through the town’s collective predicament. These ideas of participating in community and of recognising the importance of one’s community is core to The Plague. As I will discuss in the following chapter, it is also manifest in the narrative technique that Camus employs, as well as in his attitudes toward the role of the writer in society.
In order to extend my claim that given their interwoven nature, philosophical and literary aspects in Camus’s novel should not be separated, in the previous chapter I attempted to show how *The Plague* can be read as the narrative of the Oranian people coming together to work communally through a shared predicament. They do this despite inhabiting an unaddressed social norm of separateness and their own individual suffering brought about by separation. This exploration was undertaken in order to address how community is a central concept in *The Plague*. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the literary, and specifically narratological, aspects of *The Plague* in order to extend my analysis of the theme of human connectedness (the personal-social dynamic) in the novel, showing that the literary construction of the novel is complementary in its sensitivity to its philosophical themes. I propose that the central concept of community is present in the novel’s very narration and narrative technique. Put differently, I will address how the narrative technique that Camus employs in *The Plague* is itself an expression of the idea of community and the recognition of communal situatedness.

In order to understand how the notion of belonging to and acting on behalf of one’s community is apparent in the novel’s narration, I will focus on how Camus’s choice to conceal Rieux’s identity as narrator, until the end of the novel, is dynamically related to ideas of separateness, separation, and community. As the narrator states throughout the novel, the experience of separation (along with exile and terror) was shared by all in Oran. I suggest that this is one reason for Rieux to conceal his identity as its ‘author’, as his chronicle intends to convey this common condition. This attempt to convey a collective experience can also be illuminated by Camus’s own thoughts on the relationship between the writer and their community in his 1957 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.

This chapter’s investigation consists of two parts: in the first, I explore how Camus has constructed his narrative, specifically through the novel’s mode of narration, observing how the techniques of objectivity and anonymity are employed in order to convey the

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11 “There were no longer any individual destinies, but a collective history that was the plague, and feelings shared by all. The greatest of these were feelings of separation and exile” (Camus 2009 [1947], 129); “the greatest suffering of the time, the most widespread and the deepest, was separation” (Camus 2009 [1947], 139).
collective experience of all in Oran. In other words, the personal–social dynamic of an individual’s relation to their community is dealt with by the narrator through his attempts to provide what he deems to be an objective account of the events. Rather than provide a directly personal retelling of the story, Rieux is presented as a self-consciously anonymous narrator, part of the community he describes, and he claims to pass over his personal standpoint as an individual or unique character. In this way, only the experiences that are common to all in Oran, such as those of separateness and separation, are addressed. Thus, the purpose and significance of the chronicle presented by Rieux is ultimately based in communal recognition: his attempt is to make himself one with the townspeople (rather than separate to, outside, or above them, from a narratorial point of view), and to convey their shared experiences – love, separation, exile, terror. This is, I propose, another aspect of the text’s exploration of the challenge to the condition of separateness. In his construction of a narrator who provides an account of the community’s collective experience, and its development from a condition of separateness and the experience of separation to a form of solidarity, Camus’s act of writing the novel arguably recognises and reaffirms the importance of human connectedness and community. By examining the way Camus has constructed his novel we can see the inseparability of the literary (narratological) and philosophical aspects in his treatment of these themes.

In the second part of this chapter, I continue this discussion of the communal emphasis in *The Plague*’s narrative method by observing how this sentiment – acting and writing for one’s community – is echoed in Camus’s own life and thought. By comparing Rieux’s narrative method to Camus’s letter to Roland Barthes (1955) and Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (1957), I aim to highlight how writing, both in life and in the novel, can be an act that acknowledges and reaffirms the importance of human connectedness and community in our lives.

Thus, this chapter shows how, in light of the discussion in the previous chapter, *The Plague* can be read as a novel whose very narrative technique and narration foreground the enduring value of community and human connectedness. This to say, the novel can be read as one whose literary and philosophical aspects work together to address the same theme: the recognition of community and shared experience. Through recognising that we are connected and communally situated, through collective experience, we can
realise that we are not existentially isolated and that there is more to life than our individual aims and experiences.

**Part I: Narrative Technique**

The way in which Camus constructs the text, presented as a document ostensibly composed by Rieux himself, dramatises the central theme of human connectedness and solidarity, in a community afflicted by both the condition of separateness and the suffering of separation. This is to say that the narrative technique, based on the aims of anonymity and objectivity, which I will expand on in the course of this chapter, is employed to provide an account of collective experience. The character of Rieux uses these techniques, I propose, in order to convey not just his own but the experiences and feelings (separation, separateness, terror) that everyone in Oran shares collectively. In other words, by concealing his identity (and later revealing it), by providing a quasi-objective, third-person account of the events (two of the most striking aspects of his method), and by excluding reference to his personal sufferings (apart from those which could have been shared by the citizenry), Rieux makes himself as one with the community he describes. In this way, Rieux becomes a believable spokesperson for his community. Moreover, the chronicle he constructs (after the events have occurred) is an expression of his and his fellows’ shared experiences, and stands as testament to their overcoming of separateness, separation, and terror. Put differently, by concealing his identity (and later revealing it), and by providing what may loosely be called an objective retelling of the events that unfolded in Oran, Rieux’s narrative technique is very effective in allowing him to speak on behalf of the community, and to convey the experiences that they underwent as a collective.

As Edwin Moses points out, the narrative method of *The Plague* is striking for its subtle complexity and originality. Moses describes the method thus:

> A non-literary man, a doctor, writes a chronicle of which he himself is a central character; he disguises the fact that he is the narrator, but does so inefficiently, so that the reader is provided with numerous clues to his identity. (1974, 419)

As mentioned above, Camus presents the novel as if it were written by the character Rieux, some time after the plague has ended. Moses’s article draws attention to Camus’s choices relating to the construction of the narrative, and how these choices raise numerous questions pertinent to how we understand the text. While I do not have space to expand on Moses’s discussion in depth, key aspects of his commentary, such as
Rieux’s attempts at anonymity and his role as spokesperson for Oran, are vital to the current discussion.

The veil of anonymity that Rieux adopts often nonetheless hints at his identity; most notably, the story predominantly appears to focus on Rieux’s actions, and he is the only character to whose thoughts readers are granted some access. He is also a fairly intrusive narrator, for he comments on, or explains his method throughout the narrative, as well as the events that are unfolding. Interestingly, both these characteristics undermine the narrator’s apparent efforts at anonymity and objectivity. Moses proposes, however, that this ‘amateurism’ (which Rieux himself makes note of in the excerpt below) is a technique employed by Camus in order to strengthen Rieux’s credibility as everyman and spokesperson of his community (Moses 1974, 425). In other words, the narrator’s claim to be a “historian of the heartaches and soul-searching that the plague imposed on all our fellow-citizens” (Camus 2009 [1947], 101) is strengthened by his amateurism. His techniques (and his slip-ups) show that he is inherently tied to his fellow citizens, and has authentically suffered along with them through the experiences he describes. Moreover, we believe him to be an ‘ordinary’ person who has written the chronicle (some time after the pestilence has subsided) in memory of (and testament to) the horrific events that he and his community have endured together. This is important to Rieux’s role as spokesperson for his community, for as Moses also highlights; “If the narration is to have any hope of communicating successfully, it must give the sense of having been hewn out of the plague-experience” (1974, 423). Put differently, through the objective–anonymous technique employed, Rieux’s narration, in a complex way (which I explore further below), shows that he is on the same level as those whose experiences he is attempting to convey, rather than outside or ‘above’ them.

While there may be numerous hints to his identity throughout the narrative, Rieux, as narrator, still retains a level of anonymity throughout (at least on a first reading of the text). A vital aspect of this technique, however, is that Rieux draws attention to the fact that he is deliberately concealing his identity by stating that he will reveal it later. He does this while attempting to explain his intention and method:

The narrator, whose identity will be revealed in due course, would not have any claim to authority in an enterprise of this kind if chance had not made it possible for him to gather a considerable number of testimonies and if force of circumstance had not involved him in everything that he describes. This is what entitles him to act as a

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12 See, for example, p. 100, p. 105, p. 129, and p. 138-139.
historian. Of course a historian, even if he is an amateur, always has documents: first of all, his own testimony, then that of others since, by virtue of his role in this story, he came to collect the confidences of all the characters in it; and, finally, he has written texts which he happened to acquire. He intends to borrow from them when he sees fit and to use them as he wishes. (Camus 2009 [1947], 7-8)

This passage is the first of many in the novel in which the narrator directly addresses the reader (or overlays a third-person narration on to his first-person account) about the self-consciously constructed nature of the text he is presenting. He outlines what is in one way the multi-textual, composite nature of the chronicle (his testimony, the testimonies of others, and written texts, including telegrams, newspapers, radio-communiques, and so on), but in doing so also brings the reader’s attention to the fact the text will remain (in some ways) a personal account. The narrator apparently chooses what aspects or parts of these texts will be part of the overall text – his chronicle of the plague. In light of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s exploration of narrative, another way to say this is that Rieux’s narration is both extradiegetic (his narrative frames both the story and the other narratives, such as Tarrou’s) and homodiegetic (he is a character in his own narration and in the novel’s unfolding events) (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 94-95). By presenting the narrative’s events and the narrator from a third-person perspective, however, Camus conceals his narrator’s role as focaliser of the text. Until the conclusion, the identity of the narrator remains an open question, and one that may not have even needed an answer if the narrator did not say at the beginning of the text that his identity would be revealed. As a result of this foreshadowing, the question of ‘who writes?’ becomes salient. In other words, through the non-disclosure of the narrator’s identity and through the narrative’s largely being rendered in the third person (the passages excerpted from Tarrou’s journal are exceptions to this) or first-person plural, the identity of the narrator is not made explicit or its significance made clear until the novel’s denouement. Once Rieux reveals himself as the chronicle’s ‘author’, however, our understanding of the narrative’s construction is called in to question.

In the closing pages of the novel, Rieux reveals his role as narrator, saying:

This chronicle is drawing to a close. It is time for Dr Bernard Rieux to admit that he is its author. But before describing the last events, he would like at least to justify his role and to point out that he has tried to adopt the tone of an objective witness. Throughout the period of the plague his profession put him in a position to see most of his fellow-citizens and to observe their feelings. Hence he was well-placed to report what he saw and heard. (Camus 2009 [1947], 232)
One of the most striking aspects of this passage is Rieux’s reminding the reader of his attempt to be ‘an objective witness’, a position that arguably requires some level of distance between a person and the events and people they describe. In other words, the perspective of an ‘objective witness’ would usually be one from outside of the drama they report on, from the position of ‘a fly on the wall’, the extradiegetic narrator. The character Rieux, however, cannot authentically claim this position, since through his position as a doctor of considerable influence, his decisions leading up to and during the plague would have a profound effect on the drama in which he is inextricably involved. His choices and actions (the decision to call the plague by its actual name, the administering of new serums, the setting up of auxiliary hospitals and quarantine camps, and assistance in the formation of Tarrou’s health teams, to name a few examples) in part shape the story he is recounting, as well as the reader’s sense of the lives of Rieux’s fellow-citizens. On the other hand, however, Rieux is in a better position than almost any other character in the novel to witness such things (along with Tarrou, who is an intradiegetic narrator himself through his first-person diary entries, on which Rieux draws), for his position as a doctor allows him to see the social, physical, and personal effects that the plague has upon the inhabitants of Oran, first-hand.

Rieux’s proximity to the events he describes raises the question as to why Camus chose his narrator’s chronicle to be presented in the style of an objective–anonymous witness, and why Camus has Rieux finally reveal his identity (thus destroying the illusion of objectivity and anonymity). I suggest that the effect of such narration is to underscore the plague as a collectively experienced event, as “a matter that concerned everybody” (Camus 2009 [1947], 101). Rieux, along with Tarrou and the other main characters, realise the gravity of their situation with the formation of the first voluntary health teams; the plague cannot be confronted through merely individual efforts, but rather through solidarity and by coming together as a community, for the epidemic affects the lives of all in Oran. It follows, then, that the suffering, exile, and feelings that the inhabitants of Oran experienced were, in a sense, shared collectively: everyone in the town suffered from the conditions imposed upon them by the plague. All were brought to face their previously unaddressed condition of separateness, and all had to deal with their exile and separation from their loved ones. Rieux’s chronicle then, I suggest, is largely concerned with how the community reacted to the extreme situation of the plague, and through his presentation as an anonymous and apparently objective witness, Rieux can convey the shared and collective nature of his and his fellow-citizens’
experiences. Thus, we see throughout the narrative the narrator’s oscillation “between the use of first-person plural and third-person plural … which both makes him an anonymous member of the collective and endows his tone with a sense of civil responsibility towards his fellow-citizens” (Strömberg 2014, 85). Explaining his decision concerning this anonymous-objective approach, Rieux writes:

When he [Rieux] felt tempted to add some confidence of his own to the thousands of voices of the victims, he was prevented by the thought that there was not one of those sufferings that was not at the same time that of others, and that in a world where pain is so often solitary, this was an advantage. Incontestably, he had to speak for all. (Camus 2009 [1947], 232)

This insight reveals two things about the way Camus has constructed the character Rieux’s narrative: first, it shows the scope of what Rieux has been trying to convey through the story, which is the suffering that was shared by all his fellow-citizens, albeit in different forms. Secondly, by addressing the suffering of the community as a whole – by speaking ‘for all’ rather than only for his own individual suffering – Rieux refrains from revealing much information about himself at all. As Brian Fitch points out:

Although his name is finally revealed to us, Bernard Rieux, [as narrator] is wholly inaccessible and unknowable … since the only Bernard Rieux known to us is the daily fighter against the plague, the companion-in-arms, so to speak, of Tarrou, Grand, and the rest of them. He is, moreover, only known to us from the outside, his inner thoughts and feelings only perceptible inasmuch as they are articulated or given bodily expression. (Fitch 1982, 32)

The lengths to which the character of Rieux has apparently gone to suppress his identity, as shown through the absence of references to his thoughts and feelings (except as described from either Tarrou’s notebooks or through Rieux’s third-person perspective), arguably strengthen this character’s authority to address the shared sufferings of his community, as he is part of it. It allows Rieux to speak in relation to those he is describing, connecting him to his fellow-citizens in anonymity. This self-effacement, for want of a better term, affects the reader’s interpretation of the novel since, before Rieux’s identity is revealed, the communal aspect of suffering is emphasised. In other words, the only information that Rieux discloses to the reader about himself is information based upon experiences that were common (or meaningful) to all of Oran’s inhabitants over the course of the epidemic. As he explains, while still maintaining the third-person voice:

He [Rieux] deliberately took the side of the victim and wanted to meet others, his fellow-citizens, on the basis of the only certainties they all have in common, which
are love, suffering and exile. Thus there is not one of the anxieties of his fellows that he did not share and no situation that was not also his own. (Camus 2009 [1947], 232)

In light of this attitude, the reader is able to situate the information that Rieux, willingly or not, lets slip about himself, within this realm of the townspeople’s common experiences. For instance, the reader is aware of how Rieux suffers (although this is not dwelt on in much detail) from the separation from his wife, as well as from her death and Tarrou’s death. These aspects of Rieux’s character to which the reader is given access are only divulged because they are related to the common ‘certainties’ (love, suffering, and exile) of the townspeople of Oran. Moreover, the reader only comes to know these aspects through the third-person, extradiegetic perspective of the narrator and his description; the narrator as an individual character remains, for most of the novel, shrouded in anonymity. Following this, the revelation of Rieux’s identity, paired with the explanation that the suffering, exile, hope, and love that he presents are all part of the experience that everyone in Oran endured, serves to strengthen Rieux’s authority as chronicler.

Lastly, it is important to the address the impact of Camus’s method for his narrator, Rieux, on the reader: writing this character as an anonymous, apparently objective, witness, and the late disclosure of his identity, influences how we make sense of The Plague. The revelation of Rieux’s identity as the novel’s narrator disrupts readers’ interpretation of the novel, as it requires us to reflect on how we have interpreted Rieux as a character in the text, and how we now interpret him as also being the text’s narrator. Knowing that Rieux is both encourages us to reflect on and re-read the character and the narrative differently. In other words, the reader is made to reflect twice: once we are aware that Rieux the doctor and the narrator are the same character, the idea that we have of both the narrator and the doctor is different to that of our original reading. We realise that the narration cannot (ever) be purely objective, for Rieux’s actions have an impact on the outcome of the drama he narrates. Furthermore, he is no longer anonymous; on a second reading of the text, as we know who the narrator is, we pick up on slips that have hinted at his identity, and are more acutely aware of his role in how the story unfolds. Rieux’s integrity as a relatively reliable narrator is also brought into question on second and subsequent readings, as we realise
that this character apparently selects the information to which the reader has access.\textsuperscript{13} On the other hand, revealing his identity also strengthens Rieux’s authority as the text’s narrator: we may now read this character as one who was directly involved in the drama, and who had ample first-hand experience of how the townspeople of Oran dealt with their situation. The reader’s doubled reflection, I suggest, leads to the realisation of the impetus behind a narrative technique that has Rieux relating a communal (or collectively inscribed) story. We, as readers, understand that although the story is told to us from the perspective of an individual and knowable (and now perhaps unreliable or at least fallible) source, what the text is centred on is what the character of Rieux set out to convey: the collective experience of plague, struggle, exile, and love of the people of Oran.

The manner in which Camus, through the character–narrator of Rieux, positions the reader is nonetheless somewhat jarring. This is to say that Rieux’s focus on the collective experience of a people, rather than just individual characters is, in some senses, unfamiliar and even perhaps disconcerting. In the realist tradition of fiction, readers are used to relating to individual characters (or the narrator) of a text, but arguably less used to engaging with the experience of a whole community at once. After the revelation of Rieux as narrator, and his final exegesis on the construction of his chronicle, readers realise that this collective experience is what Rieux has been conveying throughout the narrative. In other words, the characters that we come to know also stand in for numerous others in Oran who underwent the same (or a similar) experience. Rieux’s apparent choice to make himself anonymous, I propose, relates to the notion of collective experience. By not having Rieux’s identity disclosed until the conclusion, the narration avoids being read as a purely personal account, as the focus of the chronicle is not on this character’s individual experience, but on the community’s experience. As Rieux says, the only personal sufferings that he discusses are those relating to (or part of) what everyone in Oran has undergone. Thus, the narration positions the reader to interpret and respond to the novel as a chronicle of the whole community, rather than as the tale of a few individual characters. This technique, part of

\textsuperscript{13} In terms of a narrator’s reliability, Rimmon-Kenan writes that: “the main sources of unreliability are the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme” (1983, 100). In the case of Rieux, the revelation of his identity shows him to have both limited personal knowledge of the events at which he was not present, as well as having been deeply involved in crucial decisions pertinent to the unfolding events. However, due to his use of Tarrou’s notebooks (and other second-hand accounts), and overall aim to treat the events he describes as communally experienced, Rieux manages to remain a largely reliable narrator.
the novel’s literary construction, not only complements but underscores the philosophical ideas considered in the narrative as explored in Chapter One.

Part II: Camus on Writing and Community and The Larger Scope of The Plague

The aspiration to speak in relation to all and to address the shared experiences and conditions of one’s community is, as I have attempted to show, another aspect of the movement from individual separateness to the recognition of community in The Plague. I propose that this communal recognition and the attempt to address a collective experience is dynamically tied to Camus’s ideas about the role and responsibility of the writer, particularly in the way he outlines them in his 1957 Nobel Speech. Camus says that his writing:

cannot be separated from my fellow men, and it allows me to live, such as I am, on one level with them. It is a means of stirring the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common joys and sufferings. It obliges the artist not to keep himself apart; it subjects him to the most humble and the most universal truth … The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. That is why true artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge. (Camus 1979 [1957])

The aspects of Rieux’s narration, most notably the character’s stated aim to describe the collective experience of a situation, rather than a purely individual reaction to one’s experiences, which I have so far discussed in relation to The Plague, bear numerous similarities to the connection between the writer and his community captured in Camus’s words above. Rieux’s veiled anonymity as narrator is a technique that places his character on the same level as his fellow characters; he views himself (and thus the reader is also encouraged to view him) as one with his community; and he speaks almost exclusively in relation to them. In other words, he does not place himself apart from those whom he describes, and he only discusses those parts of his experience during the moments that relate to (and are shared by) the experiences of others. The interplay between Rieux’s personal account and the social situation he describes demonstrates Camus’s own feelings towards, and relationship with, the community whose struggles he shared over the course of his life. The idea of the writer as situated within (writing for and in relation to) a community is of key importance to Camus, as he discusses later in his speech:
I have been supported by one thing: by the hidden feeling that to write today was an honour because this activity was a commitment – and a commitment not only to write. Specifically, in view of my powers and my state of being, it was a commitment to bear, together with all those who were living through the same history, the misery and the hope we shared. (Camus 1979 [1957])

The similarities between the approach outlined here by Camus and the approach taken in Camus’ depiction of his character Rieux in *The Plague* centre on the idea of the communal, and on writing as an activity through which the writer bears the shared suffering, hope, and experiences of their community. Through the character–narrator of Rieux, Camus dramatises how writing can be an act through which the author (or narrator) deals with and addresses events, problems, and issues pertinent to themselves and the community of which they are part, and the experiences they have all endured. As Camus explains to Roland Barthes in his open letter concerning the social aspect of *The Plague*:

> far from feeling installed in a career of solitude, I have, on the contrary, the feeling that I am living by and for a community which nothing in history has so far been able to touch. (Camus 1979 [1955], 222)

I suggest that this ‘living by and for a community’ is represented in *The Plague* through both the responsible activities of Rieux and the health teams, as well as through Rieux’s narration. The chronicle, at a fundamental level, tells the story of a town that, despite functioning according to the unaddressed social norm of separateness, comes together once the extreme situation (the plague) occurs. Furthermore, despite suffering individually, the Oranians come together from separation and exile. The disruption to their everyday routines (which fosters the condition of separateness), brought about by their separation from the outside world and their loved ones, causes them to rethink their relations with others. Eventually they realise not only the importance of human connectedness, but also that the problem that they face can only be worked through collectively. While thousands lose their lives, the story is, in a way, one of the Oranian community’s triumph. Not only does the town survive the epidemic, communal ties are, at least for a period, recognised and restored. As Camus says (to repeat a significant point made above):

> *The Plague* does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Outsider* to *The Plague*, it is towards solidarity and participation. (Camus 1979 [1955], 220)
The story of *The Plague* is one of solidarity, participation, and communal recognition, and these themes are reinforced by means of its narration. The techniques that Camus employs in his construction of Rieux emphasise that this character is part of his community and speaks in relation to it: Rieux presents to the reader a picture of the pains, suffering, and experiences that he and his fellows lived through. Moreover, in light of Camus’s thoughts on the role of the writer, *The Plague* can be seen as a testament to the idea of community, which is summed up most clearly in the novel’s conclusion:

> Dr Rieux decided to write the account that ends here, so as not to be one of those who keep silent, to bear witness on behalf of the victims, to leave at least a memory of the violence and injustice that was done to them, and to say simply what it is that one learns in the midst of such tribulations, namely that there is more to admire in men than to despise. (Camus 2009 [1947], 237)

By bearing witness to, and speaking on behalf of, his community and the suffering that they all endured together, Rieux ensures that a memory of their coming together will endure. This mirrors Camus’s own thoughts on writing, as outlined above. Through the presentation of the character Rieux and his chosen narrative technique, Camus shows his thought at work, for the novel is in many ways a manifestation of “the commitment to bear, together with all those who were living through the same history, the misery and the hope we shared” (Camus 1979 [1957]). The character Rieux, *The Plague*, and their author Camus, show how literature can express the writer’s vital bond with the community on whose behalf they speak.

**Conclusion**

The similarities between Camus’s thoughts on the role of the writer and the narrative technique that he employs through Rieux show how *The Plague* can be read as a novel that deals, at a deep structural level, with community and collective experience. By taking into account the shared nature of human experience, and the notion of collective responsibility, Camus’s thought and his literary work remind us of our fundamental connectedness as human beings. A combined focus on philosophical and narratological as demonstrably and intimately interrelated dimensions of Camus’s fiction enables a richer understanding of the *The Plague* and its central themes of separateness, separation, collective experience, and the recognition of community.
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have shown how an integrated literary–philosophical approach to *The Plague* brings to light the themes of recognition of community and shared experience as central to Camus’s thought. By also examining the novel’s narrative structure, mode of narration, and the narrator’s depiction of the Oranians’ lifestyles as narratological demonstration of these themes, we are able to understand *The Plague* as a narrative that deals with fundamental aspects of the human condition (community and human connectedness) in complex and compelling ways.

Rather than following others’ readings of *The Plague* that privilege the philosophical aspects of the novel over the literary, or that (less often) privilege the literary over the philosophical, I have attempted to show the inseparability of the novel’s central themes and elements of its construction. Some readings of *The Plague*, which suggest that the literary aspects are not important to the novel’s philosophical discussion, or treat the novel as if it were a philosophical tract, overlook the complexity and importance of its construction. On the other hand, to focus purely on Camus’s treatment of literary themes and conventions (such as Rieux’s reliability as a narrator, multiple levels of narration, and shifting styles of writing, for example) outside of the novel’s philosophical underpinnings (or Camus’s thought generally) also runs the risk of misinterpreting the novel, or at least missing its richness. In short, by not taking into account the intertwined nature and complexity of the literary–philosophical relationship in *The Plague* (as well as Camus’s other works), I suggest, is to lose some of the scope and depth of Camus’s fiction.

As I found in Chapter One, *The Plague* shows the story of a town coming together in solidarity to work through a shared predicament. The characters work together despite inhabiting a pre-existing social condition of separateness (fostered by a lifestyle focused solely on routine, habit, and commercial enterprise) and dealing with their own individual suffering of separation (brought about by quarantine and preventive measures instilled by the authorities). Viewed in light of Jan Patočka’s notions of the ‘life in balance’ and the ‘life in amplitude’, we are able to see the connection between the story of the Oranian townspeople in the narrative of *The Plague* and philosophical concepts of separateness, separation, collective experience, and recognition of the importance of human connectedness. The significance of these insights is that they highlight not only
the presence of philosophical questioning (both on an individual and collective level) in
the novel, but that they also allow us to interpret *The Plague*, and Camus’s philosophy,
in a different way.

Complementary to these findings is the discussion of Camus’s narrative technique in
Chapter Two. I found in the second chapter that the narrative method employed by
Camus, through the narrator–character of Rieux, is constructed in such a way that
emphasises the events and feelings of the story as being collectively experienced. The
complex and multi-layered mode of narration employed by Camus is focused on the
feelings and experiences that were common to all over the course of the epidemic,
rather than the personal experiences of the narrator. As a close narratological analysis,
undertaken alongside a philosophical exploration (in Chapter One), has shown, these
two aspects of the ideas of community and human connectedness in *The Plague* are
inseparable, especially when viewed in light of Camus’s Nobel Prize Acceptance
Speech. The significance of these findings is that they highlight Camus’s skill and
accomplishment as an author, and that they highlight the importance of taking into
account the literary aspects of *The Plague* in order to better understand what it was that
he was trying to express and explore in the novel. By comparing the narrative and the
mode of narration of *The Plague* to the ideas that Camus espouses in his Nobel Prize
Acceptance Speech, we are able to see how community and human connectedness are
for this author central ideas, not only to this novel in particular, but to his life and
outlook in general.

By viewing the narratological and philosophical aspects of *The Plague* as inseparable
from one another in their expression of community and shared experience, we are thus
able to read the novel in a different yet richly rewarding way. The value of Camus’s
fiction lies in his interest in exploring vital and difficult problems of the human
condition through his interweaving of the philosophical and the literary. His literature
brings to light the problems and predicaments of our everyday experience and forces us
to reflect on our own moral, political, and philosophical attitudes and prejudices.
Reading *The Plague* in light of its philosophical–literary dynamic, we are reminded of
the importance of community and human connectedness in our own lives, and of the
power of literature as a medium through which we are able to connect with the stories
and lives of others. To remind us of this communal situatedness is the role of the writer,
according to Camus, and Camus’s demonstration of our fundamental human
connectedness and the importance of community in *The Plague* helps to explain why he remains a relevant and important literary and philosophical figure to this day.


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