

# HOW CHARACTERS IN “THE PLAGUE” BEHAVE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO PEOPLE’S BEHAVIORS IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Muhammad N. Daroini, Berlianza D. Sansabila, Alif N. Askha

Universitas Negeri Malang

dhifm29@gmail.com, berlianza24@gmail.com, agushagane@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *This study is an analysis of sociological and psychological dimensions of characters in the novel “La Peste” (The Plague) by Albert Camus (1947). It aimed at describing the sociological and psychological dimensions of the main, side, and minor characters in “The Plague” and correlating them with people’s behaviors in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. These characters were chosen because their behaviors could be reflected in people’s behaviors in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. To analyze the characters, this study used Lajos Egri’s theory (1946) which stated that there a character has three basic dimensions: physiological dimension, sociological dimension, and psychological dimension. “The Plague” is a novel about an epidemic in the city of Oran in the 1940s which caused various reactions on the townfolks. The virus that attacked Oran may be different from one that we have to deal with in real life, but how the characters in the novel reacted to it is similar to how our society reacts to COVID-19 pandemic, in which different person shows different reaction and behavior.*

**Keywords:** *psychological dimension, sociological dimension, pandemic*

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## INTRODUCTION

A pneumonia-like case was found in Wuhan in December 2019 which was caused by an unknown virus. The new disease, then, is called coronavirus disease of 2019 or COVID-19 with the novel coronavirus was called SARS Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) which is close to the 2002 SARS virus (SARS-CoV) based on clinical criteria and available serological and molecular information (Rabi, Zoubi, Kasasbeh, Salameh, & Al-Nasser, 2020). This virus spread widely and easily inside and outside China through droplets. Thus, people will be easily infected when they have close contact with the carrier or the infected people. A global-scale lockdown and quarantine were demanded as the world’s concern to diminish this wide-spreading virus. A decision is made as an action to minimize this virus transmission and it affects the society’s daily activity.

A novel by Albert Camus entitled “*La Peste*” 1947 or in the English version translated by Stuart Gilbert called “*The Plague*” 1948 set in the 1940s in the city of Oran which sudden lockdown was applied due to to an unknown plague epidemic. The situation shown in the novel was similar to the situation happening because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the whole countries were being locked down, all people should also be quarantined. The various behaviors were shown by people both in the novel and in the current COVID-19 pandemic towards the situation also remain interchangeable. Based on the authorities of the characters in the novel, this study aimed at analyzing the their different behaviors and the relevance that can be found in people’s behaviors during the current COVID-19 pandemic. This study analyzed the different behaviors and related them the three characters’ dimensions proposed by Lajos Egri (1946). The three dimensions are physiological dimension, sociological dimension, and psychological dimension that without which we will not be able to figure out a human being (Egri, 1946).

As this study analyzed how each character behaved towards the epidemic, it aimed at finding the characterization of each character first. Then, it continued to analyze how the characters’ behaviors are relevant to people’s behaviors in the latest COVID-19 pandemic through analyzing the action that each character deals with the plague epidemic according to their characterization. Thus, considering the characterization and different behaviors which were relevant with people’s behaviors in the current COVID-19 pandemic, this study formulated “*How Characters in ‘The Plague’ Behave and Its Relevance to People’s Behaviors in Covid-19 Pandemic*” as the article title.

## METHOD

Williams (2007) stated that qualitative research involves a discovery and descriptive research involves the identification of a phenomenon based on observation and exploration. Based on that statement, this study was categorized as descriptive qualitative research as it was discovery results and presented in a descriptive approach. This study used a novel entitled "*La Peste*" by Albert Camus (1947) that is translated by Stuart Gilbert into "*The Plague*" (1948) and a book by Lajos Egri entitled "*The Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*" (1946) as the main sources to be analyzed. Other sources which were presented later in the references were also used to find any description needed and to help the analyzing process.

In the process of collecting the data, this study used a library research process in which the researchers applied a step-by-step process in gathering the information through citing and note-taking. Both citing and note-taking were used in this study to get the information needed from the sources, such as articles and textbooks. The steps done by the researchers were: reading the novel, reading the related literature, comprehending them, dividing the characters in the novel into some behavioral aspects, finding important details, correlating the details found in the novel and theories found in the related literature, analyzing the characterization of each character, analyzing the characters' behaviors in the novel and people's behaviors in current COVID-19 pandemic, finding the relevance, and making a conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

#### a. Character

A character is a crucial part of the story since it executes how the story goes. A character in a story can be human, animal, or other creatures. It can be classified into two types, flat character and round character (Klarer, 1998, p.17). A flat character is a character that is uncomplicated and never changes from the beginning of the story until the end of the story. A round character is a character that is complicated and more complex than other characters in the story.

In a story, a character is divided into two categories, protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist usually refers to the hero while the antagonist refers to the villain in the story. There are three types of characters in the story; main character, a secondary character, and a supporting character (Tarigan, as cited in Udayana, 2017, p. 4).

The main character is the focus of the story. It explains to the viewers about the story such as the plot and other characters. A secondary character is a character that usually has the closest relationship with the main character in a story. A supporting character is a character that supports the main character and secondary character in the story. The supporting characters usually support the protagonist. The main character in a story is usually a protagonist. However, the protagonist does not have to be a hero character in the story. An author can make a story that focuses on the protagonist who acts as a villain.

#### b. Characterization

Characterization is the way the author presents and reveals the characters in a story (Udayana, 2017, p. 4). In other words, characterization is the characters' information in the story. The information can refer to age, personality, gender, motivation, etc. It is also used to differentiate the character in the story. There are three levels of characterization dimensions that describe the character's basic information; physical, social, psychological (Werek and Warren, as cited in Udayana, 2017, p.6). Physical is the appearance, physical condition, or the build of the character such as height, sex, and age. It is the basic level because it shows the appearance of the character and the viewers can easily recognize it. Social is the character's status in the story such as social level, religion, and profession. Psychological is the character's inner self. It refers

to how the mindset of the character, intention, motivation, and things related to the character's feelings and emotions.

According to Klarer (1998, p.18), there are two different methods of characterization, explanatory characterization and dramatic characterization. Explanatory characterization is the method that describes a character's personality by using a narrator or direct comments. The narrator becomes the media that explains the character's personalities to the viewers. Meanwhile, dramatic characterization is the method that describes the character personalities through the way they interact with other characters and how the characters act in the story. Besides, there are also other characterization methods such as the character-on-character characterization method, contextual characterization method, and mixing method (Kenney, as cited in Udayana, 2017, p.5). The character on character method is the method that describes a character's personality from other characters' perspectives. The contextual method describes a character's personality from the environment where the character lives. While, the mixing method is the method that describes a character personality using more than one method of characterization.

### **CHARACTERS' DIMENSIONS**

Referring to Egri (1946), an object has three dimensions which are depth, height, and width. Besides the three dimensions, human beings also have three additional dimensions which are physiology, sociology, and psychology that without which we must not be able to figure out them. The three additional dimensions are:

#### **a. Physiological Dimension**

Physiological dimension is physical related conditions that may appear and can differ one to another. The physical differences may lead us to be helpful, tolerant, defiant, humble, or arrogant. This dimension involves sex, age, height and weight, the color of hair/eyes/skin, posture, appearance (good-looking, over/underweight, clean, neat, pleasant, untidy), defects (deformities, abnormalities, birthmarks diseases), and heredity.

#### **b. Sociological Dimension**

The sociological dimension is the environment where a person lives and it affects that person's behavior. However, by only seeing the sociological dimension, nothing can be considered as an exact analysis because it is necessary to look at other underlying reasons such as *who is that person's parents? Were they sick or not? What was their earning power? or Who were that person's friends?*. This dimension covers class (lower, middle, or upper), occupation (the type of work, hours of work, income, condition of work, union or nonunion, attitude towards the organization, suitability for work), education (degree, kind of schools, marks, favorite subjects, poorest subjects, aptitudes), home life (parents living, earning power, orphan, parents separated or divorced, parents' habits, parents' mental development, parents' vices, neglect), religion, race/nationality, place in the community, political affiliations, and amusements/hobbies.

#### **c. Psychological Dimension**

The psychological dimension, then, is the product of the two dimensions that are previously mentioned. Physiological dimension and sociological dimension influence ambition, frustration, temperament, attitude, and complexes. This dimension is about sex life/moral standards, personal premise/ambition, frustration/chief disappointments, temperament (choleric, easygoing, pessimistic, or optimistic), attitude towards life (resigned, militant, or defeatist), complexes (obsessions, inhibitions, superstitions, and phobias), extrovert/introvert/ambivert, abilities (languages and talents), and qualities (imagination, judgment, taste, poise, and IQ).

### **THE ANALYSIS OF EIGHT RELEVANT CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL**

#### **a. Dr. Bernard Rieux**

Dr. Bernard Rieux is the main protagonist of the novel. He is portrayed as a hard worker

and dedicated doctor whose motivation is to treat his patients and fight the plague. At the beginning of the novel, he tries to get rid of the thought that something bad happens in Oran after he sees so many rats die in unusual ways. However, later he is the one who recognizes the plague and tries to convince everyone that the city is in a dangerous condition. He is also very professional. It is shown by the fact that he does not get distracted by his problem while fighting the plague. As a doctor who understands how terrifying the plague is, especially after witnessing many of his patients die, he does not like how slow the government reacts to the emergency that slowly kills more people. He also detests how slow the bureaucracy and administration process. It is shown in a scene where he shows his frustration when Dr. Richard, the chairman of the local Medical Association, questions how the condition should be called rather than taking action as quickly as possible.

*Richard hesitated, then fixed his eyes on Rieux.*  
*"Please answer me quite frankly. Are you absolutely convinced it's plague?"*  
*"You're stating the problem wrongly. It's not a question of the term I use; it's a question of time."*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.53)

Then Dr. Rieux makes it very clear that his only concern is to warn everyone about the plague, which is shown in his statement:

*"It doesn't matter to me," Rieux said, "how you phrase it. My point is that we should not act as if there were no likelihood that half the population would be wiped out; for then it would be."*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.53)

Those dialogues show that as a doctor, he only tries to save as many people as possible. His persistence and determination will be shown until the end of the novel.

#### **b. Joseph Grand**

Joseph Grand is a clerk in the Municipal Office who lacks almost all sense of commercial survival, unlike most Oran people who spend their days in finding financial rewards. He is a poor person who is also a former patient of Dr. Rieux. He is described as a good person. He likes to help his neighbor, Cottard although he knows a very little about Cottard. The proof of it can be seen in the quotation below:

*"But somebody should watch Cottard tonight," he added. "Has he any relations?"*  
*"Not that I know of. But I can very well stay with him. I can't say I really know him, but one's got to help a neighbor, hasn't one?"* (Camus, 1947/1948, p.25).

He is suffering from intense anxiety over finding the "right words" to express himself. Despite that, he is a person who has a dream to write a book. He spends his free time polishing the book he dreams of. His inability to express himself and his overworked makes him unable to maintain his marriage.

At first, Dr. Rieux remarks, Grand is an insignificant people who often escapes the plague. However, the truth is vice versa. Grand do not escape, but he is a large-hearted person who does his best to fight the plague. It can be seen in the quotation below:

*That, too, is why it was natural that Grand, who had nothing of the hero about him, should now be acting as a sort of general secretary to the sanitary squads.* (Camus, 1947/1948, p.127)

**c. Cottard**

Cottard is an unstable man whose suicide attempt is failed. He has committed a crime in the past and that makes him feel some kind of constant fear that the police will arrest him. He is barely known even by his neighbors. It is clearly shown in the quotation below:

*Meanwhile, however, he informed the doctor that he really knew very little about Cottard, but believed him to have private means in a small way. Cottard was a queer bird. For a long while their relations went no farther than wishing each other good-day when they met on the stairs.*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.36)

Because of his loneliness and fear, he becomes a paranoid person. When the plague is spreading out, he feels so delighted that all people now can feel what he has already felt: paranoid and frightened. Cottard also takes advantage of the chaotic situation by doing illegal job such as smuggling. However, he is finally arrested by the authorities because of his madness. Cottard's case shows that in a time of uncertainty, company and human interaction are as important as food and safe places. The writer states this through one of the character, Dr. Rieux:

*Like Cottard he felt a need for friendly contacts, human warmth.*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.59)

**d. Raymon Rambert**

Raymon Rambert is a young French journalist who has intelligent eyes and determined-looking face (Camus, 17). He does not live in Oran, but he comes to do his job in collecting data about the colonial governance. Rambert is trapped inside Oran when the plague spreads and Oran closes all the access to escape. His motivation is to get back to her wife in Paris. However, because the authorities decide to apply total lockdown for Oran, his request to leave the city is denied. He shows his frustration for not being able to reunite with his wife. He even confronts Dr. Rieux about this as shown in a dialogue below:

*"But I don't belong here."  
"Unfortunately, from now on you'll belong here, like everybody else."  
Rambert raised his voice a little.  
"But, damn it, doctor, can't you see it's a matter of common human feeling? Or don't you realize what this sort of separation means to people who are fond of each other?"*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.84)

To get himself out from Oran, he does everything he can do, legally and illegally. He is a smart journalist and understands the condition well, but his logic cannot beat his personal feeling. It shows that it is difficult for him to resist his desire to meet his wife, even though he knows that it is insurmountable.

**e. Monsieur Othon**

M. Othon is a police magistrate of Oran. He is described as a tall and dark man. Throughout the novel, he dedicates himself to volunteering in an isolation camp. He does that because his own life is ruined by the plague. One of the most impactful events is the death of his son because of the plague. At first, he does not let this chaotic situation changes his life. He tries to live his life and treats everyone like usual, even those who are "under suspicion". It is shown in the quotation below:

*However, M. Othon was impervious to such considerations and would not let the plague change his habits. He entered the restaurant with his wonted dignity, sat down in front of his children, to them at intervals the same nicely worded, unamiably remarks.*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.111)

His optimistic character does not change even after the death of his son. It even makes him more passionate to help others who are also impacted by the plague.

**f. Dr. Richard**

Dr. Richard is one of a leader of the medical associations in Oran. When Dr. Rieux and Castel say that the disease was a plague and suggest that they should take action, Dr. Richard always doubts it. He keeps insisting that it has not proven to be a plague. He says that it is not necessary to take an action. Instead of taking action to alarm the public, he prefers to wait for the statistical report. The proof of it can be seen in the quotation below:

*Richard pointed out that this justified a policy of wait and-see; anyhow, it would be wise to await the statistical report on the series of analyses that had been going on for several days.* (Camus, 1947/1948, p.51)

**g. The Prefect**

Prefect is the head medical administrator of Oran. He is the one who is responsible to issue the regulations relating to Oran's efforts to prevent the spread of the plague. His decision is often considered slow and not strong enough by Dr. Rieux. It happens because he wants to ensure that he makes proper decisions that will not distress people. It is shown in the quotation below:

*The Prefect said to me, 'Take prompt action if you like, but don't attract attention.' He personally is convinced that it's a false alarm.*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.64)

Since he is the one who takes a big responsibility, it is understandable that sometimes he is being so careful before making any decision or issuing a regulation.

**h. Father Paneloux**

Father Paneloux is a priest who Dr. Rieux knows. He is a "learned and militant Jesuit" (Camus, 22). He is loved by the people of Oran due to his contribution to Oran Geographical Society as well as his sermons and lectures. In the novel, he gives two sermons. In his first sermon, he says that the plague is some kind of punishment for the sins that they have committed, so they deserve it.

*"Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, mybrethren, you deserved it"*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.91)

*"... Too long this world of ourshas connived at evil, too long has it counted on the divine mercy, on God's forgiveness"*  
(Camus, 1947/1948, p.92)

In his second sermon, he says that the reason for the plague is not the main matters. The more important thing is what we can learn from it. He also tries to spread hope among people, by saying that it is not necessary to abandon hope, but they have to move forward and do some good. Besides delivering sermons, he is also active in helping sanitary workers.

## THE ANALYSIS OF THE RELEVANT BEHAVIORS ACCORDING TO AUTHORITIES OR POSITIONS THE CHARACTERS HOLD

### a. Governments/Authorities' Responses and Reactions

Government roles are crucial in the prevention of the COVID-19 transmission. As the governing body of the nation, they are responsible for issuing rules and regulations related to the prevention of the COVID-19 transmission. These rules and regulations need to be decided as quickly and as precisely as possible. However, the governments of some countries are generally slow in making the decisions or not giving the correct information about the virus. For example, the Chinese government only reported a few dozen cases of "unknown respiratory diseases" in the first three weeks of January while the real condition was much worse than that. They also downplayed the risk of the virus transmitted through humans (Mitchell, Yu, Liu, Peel, 2020). Those misleading information gave the public a false perception of the nature of the virus. They are also slow in making decision and taking action. It happened because the local authorities of Wuhan did not release any statements nor make any regulations before they got orders from the higher-level municipal officials (Mitchell, et.al, 2020). The same case also happened in Indonesia. They gave late information about the spread of the virus and thus become the main cause of public distress (Jaffrey, 2020). The government confirmed the first case of corona virus was in March. At the same time, Indonesia's neighbor country such as Malaysia has already done mass testing and issued regulations to prevent the virus transmission.

The local government of Oran in "*The Plague*" also shows similar responses. At first, they are more concern in questioning the plague, rather than taking necessary actions. Dr. Richard, the head of the local Medical Association, does not want to make any statements before he is convinced whether the illness that attacks Oran is plague (Camus, 53). The Prefect, the one who is responsible for issuing rules and regulations, is also worried that the plague is only a false alarm (Camus, 64) and says that any actions taken should not caused the public panic. He also repeatedly says that he has to "look at the data" whenever Dr. Rieux urges him to take the actions to prevent more casualties. These kinds of reaction delay the preventive action that they should do earlier. The slow decision-making and action taking of the Oran government are similar to what happens in real life. Denying the data, being busy with bureaucracy, and fear of causing panic attacks are the main factors both in a fictional city like Oran and real countries like China and Indonesia become the countries with a high number of positive cases.

### b. Doctors, Medical Workers and Volunteers' Behaviors and Attitudes

In Oran, the dedication and persistence of doctors are often shown. It is mainly depicted in Dr. Rieux's character, a tiredless doctor who treats his patients during hard times. He is not distracted by his distress and his sick wife who is also being treated in the hospital. He maintains his professionalism until the end of the novel. Dr. Rieux often presses Oran's authorities to issue strong regulations to prevent the plague transmission but it is always neglected. This kind of story can be seen in real life. Doctors from all over the world show their bravery and determination in fighting the COVID-19. The risks that they have to take are huge. Dr. Li Wenliang is one of the examples. He was a Chinese ophthalmologist who works in Wuhan General Hospital. He was the one who told the possibility of a SARS-like illness which later was recognized as COVID-19. Like Dr. Rieux, he also faced strong opposition from Chinese authorities (Misra, 2020). He died after treating a COVID-19 patient. Doctors in Indonesia also show the same dedication to fight the virus. During the pandemic, people have seen the struggle, sacrifice, and steadfastness of Indonesian doctors. Until now, more than 130 Indonesian doctors who died while treated their patients (Suharto, 2020).

In "*The Plague*", the role of volunteers is also vital. Characters like Monsieur Othon, who dedicates himself to an isolation camp, and Joseph Grand who is part of sanitary workers show that people should care to others even in the hardest time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, so

many volunteers are seen to help people in needs. It is shown by Jakarta people who volunteered themselves to be a social companion for the COVID-19 patients in isolation camp (Pangestika, 2020). Professional volunteers with a medical background also helped to treat the COVID-19 patients at the University of Indonesia's Makara isolation hospital, Depok (Pangestika, 2020). Both in the novel and in real life, we can find that people are still willing to help others even in a very mourning situation.

c. People's Behaviors in Quarantine

In the novel, Raymon Rambert cannot contain his desire to go out from Oran and meet his wife in Paris. He feels like he is trapped in the city so he tries everything to find a way to go out. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some cases of people tried to break out from the quarantine also exist. In the UK, people broke the quarantine law to go traveling (Casciani, 2020). They had isolated themselves in their house for a couple of days, but then because they felt nothing wrong with them, they decided to go out from their houses. They could not contain their desire to go travel and enjoy their holiday. In Canada, people were fined for violating the quarantine law. Certainly, people still want to live normally. They do not want to be kept in their houses. This behavior is also shown in the novel by a character named Monsieur Othon. Although he does not break the quarantine rule, but he is described as a person who wants to live his life like there is no plague in Oran.

d. Religious Leader's Behavior towards a Disease

A religious leader is a person who is recognized within a particular religion as having authority within that body (Collins, n.d., Definition 1). As a person in high status, a religious leader should be able to convince people to take the best possible decision in any situations. However, instead of calming the people down during the pandemic, Father Paneloux, the priest in Oran said that the plague is some kind of punishment for their sins that they have committed, so they deserved it (Camus, 91). Later in the story, he changes his view about the plague and says that the reason for the plague does not what matters. The more important thing is what we can learn from it. He also tries to spread hope among people by saying that they cannot lose the hope, they have to move forward and do some good. He is also doing his best to help people during the pandemic like being active as a sanitary worker (Camus, 203).

In line with the novel, many Religious leaders in the world are also doing their best to help people during the pandemic. They think about ways to reduce the need for in-person gatherings like for ritual or baptism without changing the purpose and the nature of the ritual. Some of the solutions are providing guidelines for how the burial ritual can be conducted safely in Islam, offer virtual baptisms and weddings in Christian (Marshall, 2020). No exception in Indonesia, the religious leaders try to find ways to practice faith and serve their communities under the health protocol. They modify the rituals that usually involved many people in a more safe ways. For example, the ritual of Nyepi (Day of Silence) is celebrated without the Ogoh-Ogoh Carnival in Hindus, virtual services to convey religious messages to their adherents in Protestants and Catholic, issue a fatwa (religious order) to substitute the mass Friday prayer with the midday prayer (Dzuhur) at home by Indonesian Muslim organizations (Ikhwan and Yulianto, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis of characters' behaviors in "*The Plague*" by Albert Camus and its relevance to people behaviors in the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is known that the eight characters from the novel show different behavior towards the plague epidemic. It is also known that the behaviors that are shown in the novel are in some ways relevant to people's behaviors in the current COVID-19 pandemic. The eight characters chosen to be analyzed are Dr. Bernard Rieux, Joseph Grand, Cottard, Raymon Rambert, Monsieur Othon, Dr. Richard, the prefect, and Father Paneloux. Their behaviors are

categorized into four types based on the authority or position each of the characters holds. They are as governments, as medical workers and volunteers, as the people/townfolks, and as a religious leader.

From the analysis, it can be concluded that the behaviors shown by the characters are influenced by the position that each of them holds. Furthermore, it is found that the behaviors shown by them are relevant to people's behaviors in the current COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who hold the same authorities or positions as the characters in the novel. The government tends to be busy questioning what the plague instead of taking necessary action right away. Meanwhile, the people who are medical workers or volunteers are more concerned about the plague that they urge the government to take the actions right away. The people of the town are so scared by the plague for the first time, but then they break the rules that made the plague transmission widely spread. Another different behavior that was analyzed is the behavior shown by a religious leader who tends to view the epidemic as a warning from God. Later, it was found that the same authority in the real life also believe similar thing.

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