

Making Trauma Palatable: Camus and Grass's use of absurdity to appeal to readers world-wide

It can be very challenging to write about trauma and the experience of living after the trauma. Albert Camus and Gunter Grass are two Nobel Prize winners who have done this successfully and their works remain relevant today. While the two authors come from different backgrounds and wrote in different styles, they both wrote about moral responsibility when it comes to war and tragedy, making them both prime candidates for the Nobel Prize.

Albert Camus was born on November 7, 1913 in Algeria, a former French colony in Northern Africa to *pied-noir* parents, a group of French and European descendants who were born in Algeria during the French colonization (Sherman, 11). Throughout his life, he was known as many things including a philosopher, author, journalist, and political activist.

In 1938, Camus worked for an Algerian newspaper named *Alger républicain*. He had become a strong anti-fascist and was worried about the rise of fascist regimes in Europe. During the war, he also played an active role in an underground resistance effort that opposed the Germans and their advancements (Hayden, 12).

Camus published *The Plague* (or *La Peste* in French) in 1947. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive, it is considered to address the philosophical idea that everything in life is irrational and meaningless. The novel depicts a deadly plague that blows through the Algerian city of Oran. Camus has said he used information from a cholera outbreak back in 1849 that killed a large number of people

from Oran. Despite Camus's objections, critics have considered *The Plague* an existentialist novel, where forms of philosophical inquiry explain the issue of human existence.

In a time where most of Europe experienced destruction, war, and unrest, *The Plague's* themes of freedom (or lack thereof), control, and fear could easily be compared to current events. Around the world, people were experiencing lockdowns, quarantines, strict rules and regulations set by the government. When the war started, it was easy for people to ignore the pain and suffering of other people, as they were so focused on their own. This is mirrored in *The Plague* when the people of Oran are apathetic to the suffering of others, seeing their pain as separate from the suffering of everyone else. Eventually, the characters in the novel find meaning to their lives when they decide to rebel against the oppressive force. In this case, that is death. They do so by leaving the city or avoiding the efforts of those who are indifferent to the plague. During the war, millions of people fled their homes in the hopes of escaping the tyranny and death the war was inflicting. Unfortunately, any revolt against death is in vain, but the characters in Camus's novel understand the importance behind it, even if it ends in defeat every time.

Camus had an up close perspective to such conflict as he was an active member of many resistance groups. He was not just speculating on the inner battle of whether to fight or stay put. He saw first hand that both paths lead to the same unfortunate end. But he also saw the hope and optimism that came with fighting - and that was something worth dying for.

Gunter Grass was born on October 16, 1927 in what is now Gdańsk, Poland. He was raised Catholic, despite his father being a Lutheran Protestant from Germany. He identified as Kashubian, a West Slavic group whose language is similar to Polish. When he was 16, he became a Luftwaffenhelfer, then shortly after his 17th birthday, Grass was enlisted to the 10th SS Panzer Division "Fruindsberg". Grass did not disclose his military past until 2006. When asked why he enlisted, he said it was to “get out of the confinement he felt as a teenager in his parent's house” (Reuters).

Grass did not start writing until the 1950's. He is best known for *The Tin Drum*, the first in a trilogy of novels. *The Tin Drum* is told from the perspective of Oskar Matzerath, a man who at the age of three chose to stop growing as a protest against the “adult world”. The reader watches as Oskar witnesses, and sometimes participates, in the events of World War II.

Despite Grass's use of magical realism and satire, he illustrates the very real complexity of living in Nazi Germany. One of the main themes Grass focuses on is the idea of guilt and the reality of ordinary citizens during this time. He also uses unreliable narrators, such as Oskar, to add yet another layer (Braun). This use of a child/mentally ill main character represents the idea of innocence, but also a refusal to claim responsibility for one's actions.

Grass's use of dark humor, satire, as well as forcing readers to confront harsh realities was met with mixed reviews. On one hand, some found his, “idiosyncratic approach to contemporaneous history in which the demise of the Third Reich is merely a footnote to the loss of a dog” to be inappropriate (Mews, 78). Others praised him for

approaching topics like the Third Reich and the complexity of regular citizens in general, as many saw them as taboo in the late 1950's.

The Nobel Prize, which was established in 1895, should, "reflect modernity with its globalization challenges, (Homon 264). Camus and Grass both do this in their respective works: Camus by writing a fictional narrative that addresses current events and emotions in a way that at first isn't obviously about what is happening around him, and Grass by writing about the parts nobody was talking about. Both writers found a way to make their readers think and ask questions about themselves and those around them. For readers of *The Plague*, they were asked: how do you respond in tragedy? Are you selfish? Do you help others or only focus on your suffering? Will you take a stand even if it means dying in the process? Those who read *The Tin Drum* are faced with questions about morality, guilt, and shame: do you feel guilt or shame if you followed a corrupt leader? How can you morally combat that guilt and shame? These fictional narratives based on and inspired by current events, invite their readers to subconsciously reflect on their own experiences and how they and those around them responded. These men knew that a nonfiction philosophical text would only reach so many. By doing this, they represented the qualities of a Nobel Prize worthy piece of literature. Camus and Grass were able to blur the lines between philosophical and narrative analysis, forcing his readers to face their own reality.

Works Cited

Braun, Rebecca. *Constructing Authorship in the Work of Gunter Grass*. Clarendon Press, 2008.

Camus, Albert. "The Nobel Prize Speech." *London Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 6, London Magazine Ltd, 1958.

Cormican, Muriel. "The Cambridge Companion to Günter Grass." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2011, pp. 142–44.

Felix Belair Jr. Special to The New York Times. Special to The New York Times.

"Albert Camus Wins Nobel Letters Prize: NOBEL PRIZE WON BY ALBERT CAMUS War Brought Disillusionment Camus Expresses Surprise." *The New York Times*, 1957.

Hayden, Patrick. *Camus and the Challenge of Political Thought: Between Despair and Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Mews, Siegfried. *Günter Grass and His Critics : From The Tin Drum to Crabwalk*. Camden House, 2008.

Pyle, Kevin C. "Op-Comic: Reading 'the Plague' While Living through a Pandemic." *Los*

Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 5 Sept. 2020,
www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-09-05/coronavirus-pandemic-camus-plague-novel.

Reuters. "Guenter Grass Admits Serving in Nazi SS." *The Washington Post*, 6 Aug.

2006,
www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2006/08/12/guenter-grass-admits-serving-in-nazi-ss/c3380f44-9123-4ff6-9b14-55703af18695/.

Sherman, David. *Camus*. 1st ed., John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2008,

<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444303278>.

Weston-Evans, Phoebe, and Colin Nettelbeck. "Changing Perspectives: France's

Post-War Laureates and the Nobel Prize for Literature." *French Cultural Studies*,
vol. 28, no. 4, 2017, pp. 399–414, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155817721679>.