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Lucidity and Moral Action in the Theater of Albert Camus

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LUCIDITY AND MORAL ACTION IN THE THEATER OF ALBERT CAMUS

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For Gracie. My ever-faithful study companion.

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Abstract

This study addresses a gap in scholarly research on Albert Camus, first by exploring the place of his theater within his corpus. It divides Camus's corpus into a set of three mythopoeic cycles: an absurd cycle focused on the Myth of Sisyphus, a cycle on revolt centered on the Myth of Prometheus, and a cycle on judgment centered on the Greek goddess Nemesis. This structure is used to examine how his Camus's original plays (*Caligula, The Misunderstanding, State of Siege,* and *The Just Assassins*) and dramatic adaptations of the works of William Faulkner (*Requiem for a Nun*) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (*The Possessed*) fit thematically within these cycles and with his other nonfiction works produced during each period.

Beyond explaining how the plays relate to the rest of his corpus, this study, second, portrays the importance of Camus's theater to his thought by using the notion of sophrosyne as a conceptual approach to what Camus means by the terms "lucidity," "limits," and "measuredness." The individual who possesses the quality of sophrosyne possesses the moral sanity to know the good to be chosen and the evil to be avoided. One who possesses the moral clarity of sophrosyne will engage the world in an authentic fashion, fully embracing the limited human capacity to understand and change the world.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Born in French Algeria in 1913, Albert Camus was one of the most influential voices in France both during and after the Second World War. He is identified with the notion of absurdity, but to discount him merely as a prophet of the absurd is to do him a disservice. Camus only took the absurdity of the world as his starting point. During his 1957 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature Camus remarked that his life was simply part of the collective journey of his generation that had lived to see "an insane history" and had to confront the problems associated with "the destructive movement of history."[1] Throughout his corpus, which consists of novels, short stories, philosophical essays, journalism, and plays, Camus struggles with the question of how to find meaning in a world shaken from its moral foundations.

Much of the focus of the scholarship on Camus has been on his novels and philosophical essays. While those works are worthy of study, Camus's attachment to the theater, as well as his conception of the artist's role in society, show that his theatrical pursuits are worthy of a study of their own, not just a few pages dedicated to them at the end of larger reviews of his writings. This project is intended to showcase how Camus's theatrical output provides readers with a dramatic and precise distillation of his thought and provides guidance on how to navigate one's way in an absurd world. This study will begin with a look at how previous work has treated Camus's theater, proceed to a discussion of why his theatrical output is deserving of more attention, then lay out how this project contributes to Camus studies and the field of political theory by explaining how his works provide a guide to human action in an absurd world.

[1] Edward J. Hughes, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

The Work Before

Germaine Brée's treatment of Camus's plays is mainly from a critical standpoint and in this sense helps explain how each of the plays fits into each "phase" of Camus's corpus. She notes that Camus's original plays may contain simplistic plots, but that is not the point. He is working to convey a mood. "The plots of Camus' plays are starkly simple, reduced to bare essentials. They all deal with forms of revolt: a revolt against death and the arbitrary, irrational nature of man's fate in *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu [The Misunderstanding]*; a revolt against tyranny and injustice in *L'Etat de siège [State of Siege]* and *Les Justes [The Just Assassins]*."[2]

Brée discusses Camus's plays over several chapters, noting various themes found throughout them. She does not gloss over the fact that Camus's plays met with various levels of box office success but notes his plays did receive attention at smaller theatres around the world, in scholarly articles, and "seem more alive in many minds than other more resoundingly successful plays." Brée argues that Camus's work as a dramatist is important to study because "close observation of Camus' career as a dramatist cannot fail to reveal that it has a consistency and continuity which the outer pattern of production somewhat masks."[3] This study emphasizes how Camus's theatrical output parallels his other work and is guided by themes he chose to pursue in all of his writings. Indeed, the plays provide readers with a clearer conception of how to live authentically in an absurd world than his novels or philosophical essays.

Brée argues that drama is important to understanding Camus's thought because, as with much twentieth-century drama, Camus's plays show that "the stage is a court of law, where human beings are tried, questions are asked, depositions are made, verdicts are given – and

[2] Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 150.

[3] Ibid. 137-139, 138.

where only death sentences are pronounced, sentences from which there is no appeal." Brée's work shows that even though Camus's plays may not be considered "classic" in any particular sense, they are important because their atmosphere "sustains the drama and in great part conveys its meaning." Brée explains how Camus's plays fit into the three-stage progression of his works by highlighting that his plays follow a basic common pattern: "the "natural" order of human life is dislocated; a system takes over which is the very negation of order, a systematized disorder, a perversion in which the notions of good and evil are inverted; life is drained of its substance, then comes a struggle and a final resolution in which, temporarily, the natural order reasserts itself."[4] This process captures our encounter with the absurd, the need for rebellion, and finally the hope that we might be able to salvage some sense of dignity or justice by acting according to rules in which we do nothing too much.

John Cruickshank's work focuses specifically on Camus's work as the "literature of revolt." It is through this lens that he discusses Camus's theater. In his chapter on Camus's drama Cruickshank notes that one of the features of post-war French drama was its concern with man's place in the universe. He notes "Leading writers for the post-war French stage have all been concerned to reflect in their work the moral dilemmas and philosophical inquiries of the day. The 'serious' French drama has been distinguished by its attempt to dissect contemporary unrest and, in many cases, to prescribe remedies for it."[5]

He goes on to elaborate how "Camus' doctrine of revolt against the absurd" emphasizes "conflict, choice, unrest, [and] responsibility." Cruickshank's work helps justify the study of Camus's drama by recognizing that its importance stems not from the quality of the productions

[4] Ibid. 145, 148, 160-161.

[5] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 190.

of the dramas themselves, but their content. Discussing the "predominantly philosophical attitude" that Camus and other French dramatists such as Sartre put into their works, Cruickshank argues: "The general proposition that existence precedes essence, for example, has resulted in many plays in which the *situation* confronting the characters receives much fuller treatment than those characters' *psychological* aspects." This statement echoes Brée in her assertion that simple box office success should not be the measure for the importance of a drama. Cruickshank believes Camus's plays are an example of a "dramatic mind working to relate moral illumination and intellectual power."[6]

Fred H. Willhoite's discussion of Camus's plays is valuable to this project since he approaches Camus from the standpoint of Camus's contributions to political thought. Though he does not discuss the plays in great detail, Willhoite's contributions are significant since they help illuminate the political implications of Camus's drama. His discussion of *The Misunderstanding*, also known as *Cross Purpose*, is particularly enlightening as it helps highlight Camus's belief that humans can only overcome their situation through mutual assistance and cooperation. Willhoite's use of the plays to convey Camus's political beliefs and his hope for moving beyond nihilism is crucial to this study.

Edward Freeman's work is useful because it represents one of the few book-length studies of Camus's theater. Though he is sometimes critical of the quality of Camus's theatrical output, Freeman's work is important because it helps justify why one should study Camus's theater instead of dismissing it as a mere diversion from his "real" work of writing novels and philosophical essays. Freeman notes: "Camus devoted himself to the theatre throughout his life because he believed it to be the greatest form of artistic expression."[7] Since theater was such an

[6] Ibid. 190, 191, 220

essential aspect of his life, it would be a disservice to disregard his theatrical output as a potential source for further elucidation of his answer to the problems of modernity.

Freeman's approach to the plays is simple and straightforward. He admits he is working to evaluate the plays as "*theatre* rather than as philosophical literature which just happens to be in dramatic form." This project is a departure from Freeman as it aims specifically to study the plays for their philosophical and political content to discover what they have to offer readers and how they complement his other work. Freeman does relate "the theme of each play to the novels and philosophical essays where relevant,"[8] and as such, his work serves as further evidence that Camus's plays are not some tangential activity, but part of a concerted effort by Camus to produce a coherent artistic statement in various mediums.

David Sprintzen's work on Camus is very informative but he does not provide all of Camus's plays equal treatment. He spends significantly more time discussing *Caligula* than any of the other original plays. Sprintzen's work on the plays, like the others mentioned here, does indicate that Camus's dramatic output is both intentional and thematic. Sprintzen notes that *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* both fit into Camus's first stage in which an individual encounters the absurd. Sprintzen notes: "If a metaphysical revolution is clearly impossible, the passion motivating it may nonetheless express significant human needs that must be addressed and worked through."[9] In both plays we see individuals searching for an answer to their absurd situation, but none of them seems to find a satisfactory answer.

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[7] Edward Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1971), 3.

[8] Ibid. 7.

[9] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 68.

Sprintzen's treatment of *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*, or as he refers to it, *The Just,* highlights a step beyond absurdity into revolt or rebellion. Sprintzen, speaking of *State of Siege*, points out the emergence of rebellion in Camus's thought: "One cannot remain above the battle. We are all implicated. Either we acknowledge this, and make common cause with the hope of constructive achievement, or we condemn ourselves to atomization and an increasingly self-destructive self-seeking." Sprintzen shows that if *State of Siege* portrays rebellion, *The Just* portrays potential limits on that rebellion. "The future is not certain, and it can serve as the ground of justification only at the expense of a present whose felt meaning and denial have been the source of rebellion's outrage."[10] Sadly, Sprintzen's work makes no mention of Camus's adaptations of Faulkner and Dostoevsky, but his work does help further cement the justification for studying Camus's plays as part of his progression from absurdity toward rebellion, and ultimately judgment.

Stephen Eric Bronner's contribution to an understanding of Camus is to characterize him as a moralist. Since this project aims to discern whether Camus presents us with a morality or ethic by which to conduct ourselves, it is helpful to examine others who have similar views of Camus's writing. Bronner characterizes Camus as "[trespassing] the boundaries between art, politics, and philosophy, even while leaving them intact. He provides his readers, in the most basic sense, with a *literature of moral deliberation*."[11] Bronner's work on the plays further illustrates how Camus's drama is thematically related to the rest of his oeuvre. Though he recognizes the existence of Camus's adaptations of Faulkner and Dostoevsky, Bronner fails to provide any real insight into those projects, a shame given that they may be the two works that

[10] Ibid. 111, 117.

[11] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xi.

provoke readers to consider the "moral deliberation." A more careful and deliberate examination of Camus's drama gives us a greater sense of what moral deliberation means for Camus, as well as how it relates to what Camus calls lucidity.

Ronald D. Srigley's *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* is a book that highlights Camus's Greek influences. Srigley argues, "In a sense [Camus'] entire corpus is a reenactment of the Platonic and Homeric movement of exile and homecoming, descent and ascent, but in a new historical dispensation." Srigley's work fails to discuss Camus's theatrical output, but it is still important for this study in how it explores Camus's admiration for the Greek worldview. Srigley explains: "For Camus, the ancient Greeks bring to light things that had been distorted or forgotten over the course 'of twenty centuries of Christianity and modern history.' Returning to them helped him overcome those distortions, but that is the most we can say."[12]

While every work mentioned above is important to understanding Camus, the general thrust of the literature is to ignore the plays. Matthew Sharpe's *Camus, Philosophe: To Return to Our Beginnings,* is no exception to this trend, but his work is significant because it considers Camus as a serious moral theorist. Sharpe's work not only defends Camus as a philosopher but helps elaborate on the concept of sophrosyne, which is the moral exemplar this project believes is highlighted in Camus's original plays and adaptations. Sharpe limits his discussion of Camus's theater to *Caligula*. Though an in-depth discussion of each play would be helpful, it was never the aim of Sharpe's book, so to criticize him on this point is unfair.

His discussion of *Caligula* helps set up this project by noting that those who read *The Myth of Sisyphus* "cannot but be struck by Caligula's embodiment of several of the celebrated themes Camus analyses in [*The Myth of Sisyphus]*: notably this 'divine freedom' of the man who

[12] Ronald D. Srigley, *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 3,

has revolted against all consoling myths and the 'divine equivalence' of all things seen outside of societies' traditional evaluation categories." Sharpe is quick to point out that Camus's characters do not all explicitly represent him; rather, they may display some parts of him. He elaborates: "But, contra the simple idea that Camus' heroes must represent his own ethical ideals, it seems clear that they are meant to embody the kinds of *tentations* [temptations] Camus sees as timelessly presenting themselves to us in the absurd divorce or 'desert' between our deepest hopes and reality."[13] I am indebted to Sharpe's discussion of *Caligula;* it helped to provide a schematic of how I wish to proceed in this study.

I will begin by constructing thematic cycles, as Camus himself envisioned his work; and I will locate the plays in those cycles. Throughout the project, it will be noted how each play provides us with examples for how to and how not to live in an absurd world, with the hope that by the final and third cycle, readers will have a better understanding of Camus's suggestions for ethical action in an absurd world.

Camus as Intentional Artist

Camus conceptualized his work as consisting of multiple stages or cycles, each with a clear theme, and each containing various types of works from novels to philosophical essays to plays.[14] These typologies, paired with his views on art and the role of the artist, show that Camus was intentional about his work, planning to use various means of expression to convey his thoughts and to do so in a fairly systematic fashion.

The first typology Camus mentions in his notebooks came in June 1947 and consisted of five series. The first series was to focus on the absurd and would include his novel *The Stranger*,

[13] Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe To Return to Our Beginnings* (Boston: Brill, 2015), 172, 174.

[14] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010) 158, 257. The stages will be described below.

the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and his plays *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*. The second series would focus on revolt and include the novel *The Plague*, the philosophical essay *The Rebel* and a work he was calling "Kaliayev," which eventually became his play *The Just Assassins*. The third series would focus on judgment and the only work listed there is *The First Man*. The fourth series was entitled love sundered and included conceptual works entitled "The Stake," "On love" and "The Charmer." The fifth series was entitled "Creation corrected" or "The System" and was to include "Big novel + great meditation + unplayable play."[15]

In May of 1950, Camus mentions a second typology, this one framed through Greek myths. The first was the Myth of Sisyphus, which took as its theme the absurd. The second was the Myth of Prometheus, which took as its theme revolt. The third was the Myth of Nemesis;[16] and it is listed without further elaboration. In January of 1956 he returns to it, noting "The third stage is love […] The method is sincerity."[17] Though it is unclear which of the two typologies Camus was most committed to, the fact that he even conceptualized his work in such a way illustrates his intentionality. I shall emphasize the second typology, largely because it is situated so firmly in the Greek world and, thereby, gives additional support and credence to Camus's desire to speak of authentic rebellion or moral lucidity within the Greek sense of sophrosyne.

Throughout his career, Camus wrote several pieces on art and the role of the artist in society. He was critical of the idea of "art for art's sake," noting, "Art for art's sake, the entertainment of a solitary artist, is indeed the artificial art of a factitious and self-absorbed society." For Camus, artists had an important role to play in society, ensuring that their works

[15] Ibid. 158.

[16] Ibid. 257.

[17] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1951-1959,* trans. Ryan Bloom (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 172.

were grounded in reality. "There is no need of determining whether art must flee reality or defer to it, but rather what precise dose of reality the work must take on as ballast to keep from floating up among the clouds or from dragging along the ground with weighted boots." He goes on to argue that the best works will maintain "an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes."[18]

In a 1957 interview in *Demain*, Camus described the middle ground the artist must pursue: "the artist of today becomes unreal if he remains in his ivory tower or sterilized if he spends his time galloping around the political arena. Yet between the two lies the arduous way of true art. It seems to me that the writer must be fully aware of the dramas of his time and that he must take sides every time he can or knows how to do so. But he must also maintain or resume from time to time a certain distance in relation to our history."[19] Camus believed that the artist must work to portray reality in all its ugliness while showing why there is still beauty in the world. He noted, "perhaps the greatness of art lies in the perpetual tension between beauty and pain, the love of men and the madness of creation, unbearable solitude and the exhausting crowd, rejection and consent."[20] Knowing that Camus conceived of the artist as occupying an important role in society as someone who could highlight both the suffering and joys of living in an absurd world, it is no surprise that he chose to express himself in a variety of ways, including the form that scholars have so ignored, the theater.

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[18] Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 255, 265, 265.

[19] Albert Camus, "The Wager of Our Generation," in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 238.

[20] Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 267-268.

Why Study Camus's Theater?

Although Camus found his greatest success with his novels, they were not his only means of expression. As mentioned earlier, Camus also gained notoriety with his philosophical essays. While his novels and essays are worthy of praise and study, the scholarly literature has comparatively neglected Camus's theatrical output. Book-length studies of his plays are limited in number and most date from the 1960s and 1970s.[21] Considering his lifelong attachment to the theater and his conception of the artist's role in society, it is surprising that Camus's theater is relegated to a few pages in major works about him.

The reasons for this lack of study on Camus's theater may stem from the fact that only a few of his plays found success at the box office, so they have strayed far from the public consciousness. Another reason may be that they are considered "failures" as dramas. Edward Freeman is one of the authors who undertook a book-length project on Camus's theater, and he is often very critical of Camus's plays in terms of how they hold up as theater, yet he recognizes the disservice of ignoring them altogether: "[Camus'] theatre is usually considered to be a marginal activity, to be tucked away conveniently in one chapter near the end of critical studies of his work. In fact, Albert Camus was an actor and director of no mean competence who wrote, adapted or translated more than a dozen plays and was devoted to the theatre throughout his life."[22]

Christine Margerrison puts it bluntly, noting, "Although Camus's essays and prose fiction had a profound impact on the post-war generation in France and elsewhere, this is less true of his theatrical works, which had mixed success during the author's lifetime." Margerrison goes on to

[21] Christine Margerrison, "Camus and the Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, ed. Edward J. Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67.

[22] Edward Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus*, 2.

note a certain irony in the fact that Camus enjoyed working in the theater due to its cooperative nature, yet "the only area of his creative production involving direct engagement with others was also the least successful." Margerrison continues by noting that one reason for Camus's failure as a dramatist may stem from "the interactive or dialogical nature of the theatre itself, which requires engagement with others on a number of levels besides those entailed in putting on a play." Margerrison argues that what may be a strength in fictional writing may be a weakness on stage, noting, "whereas Camus's fictional first-person narratives are a source of fascination, the sometimes long theatrical monologues caused complaints of didacticism and inaction."[23]

Though these criticisms of Camus's theatrical output are fair, especially if viewed only by standards of what constitutes "good theater," categorically dismissing the plays as unimportant is a mistake. Camus's plays help illuminate and expand our understanding of his thought. Germaine Brée does not ignore the fact that Camus's plays "may not be judged masterpieces" but makes the argument that "they still merit serious consideration." Brée defends the study of Camus's work as a playwright because of its importance to illuminating themes that appear throughout his corpus. She argues that one reason for the failure of the plays to gain as much popularity as his novels is due to the very nature of theater, where an audience is listening to the plays, so they may not fully grasp the dialogue and its meaning in a sitting. "To understand the dialogue the spectator must first grasp the play in its totality and then follow an intellectual path as Camus designates it. This path leads not only toward a discussion of ideas – that is relatively habitual and easy – but it leads toward the delineation of issues that touch upon an experience of life and cannot be stated in simple terms of right and wrong."[24]

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[23] Christine Margerrison, "Camus and the Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, 67, 67, 67-68, 68

[24] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 138, 172.

Camus was passionate about the theater and acknowledged it was one of the places in the world he was happy. He described the theater as a "monastery" from which he could escape the hectic pace of day-to-day life: "In that respect the theatre is my monastery. The tumult of the world dies at the base of its walls; inside its sacred enclosure, for two months, sworn to a single meditation, turned toward a single goal, a community of working monks, isolated from the century, prepares the rite that will be celebrated one evening for the first time." Camus enjoyed working in the theater because it was one of the places where he could find individuals working collectively toward a common goal, as on a soccer field, noting: "What little I know of morale, I learned on football fields and on the stage. They have been my true universities."[25]

Camus's passion for the theater and the comradery that stemmed from staging a production not only brought him immense pleasure but perhaps provided a vision of what a cooperative society might look like. "The theatre offers the fellowship I need, together with the heavy servitude and the limitations that all men and all minds need. In solitude, the artist reigns – but over a vacuum. In the theatre he cannot reign. What he wants to do depends on others. The director needs the actor, who needs him. This mutual dependence, when it is recognized with the humility and the good humor that are appropriate to it, forms the solidarity of the profession, and gives a body to its daily fellowship. In it we are all linked together without the loss of anyone's freedom (or almost so). Isn't that a good prescription for the society of the future?"[26]

There is another and more important reason for considering Camus's plays. It is located in his passion for Greek tragedy and desire to recreate that tradition in modern guise. Camus's

[25] Albert Camus, "Why I Work in the Theatre," *Today's Speech* 10, no 4 (1962), 7, 9, 9.

[26] Ibid., 8.

lecture "On the Future of Tragedy" is illustrative of this point. Delivered in Athens in 1955, the lecture showcases Camus's belief that the era in which he was living was ripe for a rebirth of the tragic drama. Camus argued that "the tragic age always seems to coincide with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without yet having found a new form that satisfies him." The lecture raises questions as to whether or not a revival of the tragic form might help humankind work through the predicament in which it had found itself, namely a society in which nihilism threatened to destroy culture itself. Camus argues that the difference between tragedy and melodrama is that "the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified. In melodramas or dramas, on the other hand, only one force is legitimate." Camus goes on to explain that "the perfect tragic formula would be: 'All can be justified, no one is just.'"[27]

A study of Camus's theater is also important for the political lessons it teaches us. Camus's first experience with the theater came with the Théâtre du Travail, a communist-inspired theater group that Camus helped form in 1935.[28] Indeed, the group's manifesto argued that it recognized "the artistic value of any mass literature" and wanted to "show that art can sometimes come out of its ivory tower." The manifesto goes on to argue, "The sense of beauty is inseparable from a certain sense of humanity."[29] Though Camus and his troupe broke with the Communists a few years later, Camus's remarks in Athens suggest that he never changed his mind about the power of the theater as a medium. In fact, in some of his early writings, he notes that the theater is "a place where each spectator has 'a rendez-vous with himself', where he can

[27] Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 298, 301, 301.

[28] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, 48.

[29] Ilona Coombs, *Camus: Homme de Théâtre* (Paris: Nizet, 1968), 12, 12.

experience a self-definition occasioned by the soliloquies of 'those large figures who cry out on the stage.'"[30] This last comment suggests his artistic preferences for those soliloquies, a common facet of ancient Greek tragedy.

Camus argues that to avoid moral disaster, one must recognize the limits of one's action. He notes, "the chorus in classical tragedies generally advises prudence. For the chorus knows that up to a certain limit everyone is right and that the person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed."[31]

Camus's notebooks show Camus felt "the only vocation I feel in myself is telling consciences that they are not spotless and reasons why they lack something."[32] After discussing the lessons the chorus teaches, Camus notes, "The only purification comes from denying and excluding nothing, and thus accepting the mystery of existence, the limitations of man, in short, the order where men know without knowing."[33] Julian Young notes: "As Camus well knows, 'purification' carries with it an historical weight of tragic theorizing that refers us back to Aristotle. In saying that the catharsis we derive from tragedy is a certain 'lesson', he seems to be endorsing the 'clarification of events' as opposed to the 'purification of emotions' understanding of the tragic effect."[34]

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[30] Rima Drell Reck, "The Theater of Albert Camus," *Modern Drama* 4, no. 1 (1961), 43.

[31] Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 301-302.

[32] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951,* 216-217.

[33] Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* 305.

[34] Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 238.

What Young calls clarification, Camus calls lucidity, a clarity of vision for authentic rebellion, or moral decision making. In this study of Camus, the guiding principle to be sought in all of Camus's writing, but most particularly in his plays will be the search for that lucidity. In many ways, it is the central feature of Camus's thought, which I will place within the moral discipline of sophrosyne. That this notion of sophrosyne should be explored in what Camus thought of as tragic drama, is notable, both in terms of its placement within the ancient Greek sensibility that Camus so admired, and its manifestation in the world Camus so loved.

Present Study's Typology

As argued above, there is a lack of significant attention given to Camus's theatrical output in the scholarly literature. Given Camus's intentionality of expression, a study focusing on Camus's theater is pertinent. This study will work to reevaluate Albert Camus's theatrical output with a view towards how his original plays and adaptations of Dostoevsky and Faulkner fit into a three-stage conception of his writings. It is important to remember that Camus died prematurely, but overall, the mythopoeic conception of his work mentioned in his notebooks in May of 1950 fits his output up until his death better than the five-stage typology mentioned earlier in his notebooks. This project will also work to showcase how themes found in Camus's nonfiction and novels relate to those in his dramas.

A typology structured around Greek myths is appropriate given Camus's affinity for Greek culture and the important role Greek tragedy played in Greek society. Jerry L. Curtis notes: "For the Greek heroes whom Camus looked upon as prototypes of humanity – Sisyphus, Prometheus and Nemesis – are half-god, half-men. They embody at once the desire to transcend

the absurd human predicament and the anguishing realization that it is impossible to alter man's condition which is the paradoxical attitude of Camus' heroes."[35]

The first stage centers on Camus's interpretation of The Myth of Sisyphus. The gods condemned Sisyphus to an eternity of futilely pushing a boulder up a hill. Some would view this simply as eternal punishment, but Camus envisions Sisyphus as conscious of his fate. This consciousness brings him some joy as Sisyphus alone now determines how he lives his life. "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols."[36]

While Camus's use of Sisyphus captures the absurdity of human existence, it also highlights his belief in embracing man's condition. Curtis points out, "Sisyphus betrayed the secrets of the gods, captured and chained Death, repudiating Heaven in order to enjoy the pleasure of this earth."[37] In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus argues against suicide and intellectual leaps (in faith or reason) because both of them ignore man's true situation. Although humans cannot conquer death, recognizing that they are only guaranteed this life on earth allows them to reduce the power of the absurd situation, allowing them some sense of freedom. Camus argues: "The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days."[38] This first stage of Camus's output contained the plays *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding.* Both plays portray

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[35] Jerry L. Curtis, "Camus' Vision of Greatness," *Orbis Litterarum* 29, no 4 (1974), 338.

[36] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 123.

[37] Jerry L. Curtis, "Camus' Vision of Greatness," 339-340.

[38] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* 123.

humans encountering the absurdity of the world, as well as attempting to rectify their condition instead of embracing the situation.

The second stage discussed in this work centers on the Myth of Prometheus. Though Camus never wrote an essay entitled "The Myth of Prometheus," *The Rebel* and "Prometheus in the Underworld" are two pieces that highlight the myth's theme of revolt. One central feature of *The Rebel* is highlighting the difference between authentic rebellion and revolution. Camus notes that authentic rebellion affirms the dignity of humans and is aware of the impact actions can have on the present, while revolution prefers "an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood." While *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be said to represent the individual's encounter with the absurd, *The Rebel* can be thought of as explaining the consequences for society at large as humans rebel against their order.

Curtis notes: "Prometheus is viewed by Camus as a rebel standing up to the gods and, as such, a model or canon of greatness for contemporary man. It was Prometheus who stole fire and freedom, technology and art from the gods and gave them to Humanity."[39] The first stage spotlights individuals encountering an absurd world; the second stage highlights forms of rebellion against that absurdity. Prometheus committed his rebellion to benefit humanity, not merely because he wanted to. If Camus used Sisyphus to awaken humans to their condition, he uses Prometheus as an example to show how the struggle against the injustice of the world must be cooperative yet filled with the lucidity or moral clarity of limits. The plays of this cycle, *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins,* both showcase individuals struggling with decisions that not only affect their own lives but that of their community.

[39] Jerry L. Curtis, "Camus' Vision of Greatness," 340.

The third stage is informed by The Myth of Nemesis and concerns judgment. This stage is important because it underscores Camus's belief that human action should be measured and each situation must be properly judged, so limits are not transgressed. As with Prometheus, Camus never wrote an essay dedicated solely to this myth, but he mentions Nemesis at several points in his works. In the essay "Helen's Exile" Camus notes that the Greeks recognized limits to human action. "Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit."[40] In *The Rebel,* Camus says that Nemesis is "the implacable enemy of the immoderate."[41]

Collectively, Camus's plays show the difficulty of human action in an absurd world. Throughout his dramas Camus provides examples of characters who take action too far or refuse to take action and explores the consequences of those decisions. My study concludes with a discussion of two concepts that Camus's plays suggest as guides to navigating moral decision making in an absurd world. Those concepts are "measuredness" and "sophrosyne." Thomas H. Warren notes that the two terms are actually interrelated, contending: "the Greek ethical concept from which Camus's *la mesure* implicitly derives is *sophrosyne*, a cardinal moral concept which must not be translated as 'moderation,' but rather as 'measuredness,' 'measure,' 'harmony,' 'limitedness,' 'proportion,' or 'rule.'"[42] This study argues that Camus's theatrical output illustrates an evolution from human beings confronting the absurd to rebelling against it, and finally to accepting the responsibility of making careful and caring moral judgments in an absurd world. This is "measuredness." In particular, Camus's adaptations of Dostoevsky's *The*

[40] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 149

[41] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,* 296.

[42] Thomas H. Warren, "On the Mistranslation of La Mesure in Camus's Political Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (1992), 124.

Possessed and Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* highlight the importance of measured human action in an absurd world; otherwise, we transgress the limits that must not be transgressed. One final comment about this matter of "measuredness." It goes by many names: lucidity, moral clarity and courage, authentic rebellion, limits, judgment, measuredness, and I shall conclude, sophrosyne. For Camus, its content shall vary, but it always contains a shared sense of human suffering and human freedom, in an absurd and silent world.

The Structure of This Work

This project consists of five chapters. The current chapter has introduced readers to the project in general and familiarized them with Camus as an intentional artist. This chapter has also explained that while previous scholarship has discussed Camus's theatrical output, it has been understudied in comparison to his other works. Simply put, this work is an exploration of Camus's dramas, in order to determine if the plays provide additional insight into what Camus means and describes as lucidity.

This project consists of three substantive chapters (chapters 2-4). Each will examine two plays in the context of the mythopoeic cycle they are located. Chapter 2 will examine the plays *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*. These two plays are part of Camus's phase on the absurd or The Myth of Sisyphus. Though the plays have vastly different settings and plots, they each show humans encountering the absurd and showcase responses to that absurdity. Camus argued that Caligula represents someone rebelling against the absurd condition of the world by seeking absolute freedom. He notes "[Caligula] tries, through murder and the systematic perversion of all values, to practice a liberty that he will eventually discover not to be the right one." Camus's emperor "challenges friendship and love, common human solidarity, good and evil" to his own peril. Caligula is "Unfaithful to mankind through fidelity to himself. Caligula accepts death

because he has understood that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others."[43]

While *Caligula* focuses on the pursuit of freedom from a seat of power, *The Misunderstanding* showcases the need for authenticity in human interaction at the most basic level, the family. For Camus, the play "amounts to saying that in an unjust or indifferent world man can save himself, and save others, by practicing the most basic sincerity and pronouncing the most appropriate word."[44] Critics panned *The Misunderstanding* for being too pessimistic, but the play perfectly features the human encounter with the absurd and shows that human action (or in this case, inaction) can exasperate the tragic situation.

Chapter 3 will examine *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins* and their relation to the theme of revolt. During this phase, Camus explored the question of whether there were limits to humankind's rebellion against their absurd condition and if so, where those limits existed. The first play of this second phase is *State of Siege.*

In the preface to the English edition of his plays, Camus notes "there was no dissenting voice among the critics," but this was due to the play receiving a "unanimous slashing." Even though critics were critical of the play, Camus believed that even "with all its shortcomings" *State of Siege* is the writing that most resembled himself. Camus made no apologies for the play and argued, "*State of Siege* is not a play of classical conception" and might be better compared to a French morality play or "*'autos sacramentales'"* of Spain, which was "a sort of allegorical drama which staged subjects known to the whole audience in advance." Camus argued that *State*

[43] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), v, vi.

[44] Ibid. vii.

of Siege focused on liberty, which he considered "the only living religion in the century of tyrants and slaves."[45]

The Just Assassins received more critical acclaim than *State of Siege*. In the play, Camus tried to "achieve dramatic tensions through classical means – that is, the opposition of characters who were equal in strength and reason." He goes on to point out that even though he uses such a technique, it is not a conclusion to do nothing. Camus wanted the play to show that there were limits to action. "There is no good and just action but what recognizes those limits and, if it must go beyond them, at least accepts death." Camus uses the play to question whether the limit can be transgressed and if it can, whether one must pay for this transgression with their own life. In keeping with his analysis in *The Rebel*, Camus notes, "today justice serves as an alibi, throughout the world, for the assassins of all justice."[46]

Chapter 4 discusses the final stage of Camus's works before his death. As mentioned above, this study classifies this stage as judgment or The Myth of Nemesis. Judgment is an appropriate word for the works in this stage because several portray individuals acting in an absurd world and questioning whether their actions were the correct ones. The two plays discussed in this chapter are both adaptations of prominent authors. *Requiem for a Nun* is an adaptation of the novel by William Faulkner, and *The Possessed* is an adaptation of the novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

In his introduction to *Requiem for a Nun,* Camus argues, "Faulkner's intention is plain. He wanted the Stevens drama to be knotted and unknotted in the temples built by man to a painful justice that Faulkner does not believe is of human origin."[47] Though he does not share

[45] Ibid.vii, ix,ix.

[46] Ibid. ix, x, x

Faulkner's belief in a justice that is beyond human origin, Camus does still believe that justice can be painful. Camus's intention with the play is to highlight human suffering but the hope for something good to come from suffering if we are only willing to use our judgment to know when to forgive. "In the *Requiem*, the religion of suffering, notably in the seventh scene, becomes one with the catharsis, that ancient purification."[48]

Camus said *The Possessed* was one of the four or five works he ranked above all others. He loved the novel and spent many years working to bring it to the theatrical stage. Camus believed that *The Possessed* moved from "satiric comedy to drama and then to tragedy." As with *Requiem for a Nun, The Possessed* is a play that features suffering. Camus believed it was "the thread of suffering and affection" that helped audiences relate to Dostoevsky's universe. For Camus, the novel "prefigures our nihilism" and highlighted "torn or dead souls unable to love and suffering from that inability, wanting to believe and yet unable to do so."[49] As with *Requiem for a Nun*, Camus's adaptation of *The Possessed* underscores the role that judgment plays in a world of suffering. If we give in entirely to nihilism, we run the risk of being unable to show affection to our fellow humans. If acting ethically is a choice, we must have the sound judgment to alleviate suffering whenever possible. In each case of chapters 2 through 4, the plays will be discussed in the context of Camus's essays and novels.

Chapter 5 is the conclusion to my study. This chapter will review everything outlined in the chapters before it, highlighting the ways the plays fit into Camus's larger pattern of production. The concluding chapter will work to show why a survey of Camus's dramas is

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[47] Albert Camus, "Foreword to Requiem for a Nun, 1957," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 312.

[48] Albert Camus, "Excerpts from Three Interviews," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 318.

[49] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1964), v, v,vi, vi.

important, even if his plays had shortcomings. The final chapter will argue that Camus's plays do provide us with greater insight into moral action in an absurd world. As mentioned above, I shall discuss his moral exemplar as the sophrosyne.

Martin Oswald notes that the word sophrosyne "Literally translated means 'soundness of mind,' and describes the full knowledge of one's limitations in a positive as well as negative sense."[50] Sharpe argues that the word "looks back to the proverbial Delphic *mēdan agan* (nothing too much)."[51] Camus's theatrical output highlights humans encountering an absurd world and the tragedy that results when they try to overstep the bounds the world places on them. Camus never argued injustice could be entirely eradicated from the world (he was critical of movements that claimed to do so), but he never said it was not worth trying to alleviate some of the suffering found in the world. This project argues that he finds this by portraying in his dramas a conception of humanity that recognizes its place in the world and aims to carry out a rebellion that upholds human dignity.

Concluding Remarks

When considering the importance of a study of Camus's theater perhaps it is best to look back to the first political scientist, Aristotle, and remember his views on tragedy. Aristotle believed that one of the most critical aspects of tragedy is that it is imitative. He notes that man is by nature an imitative creature; we learn by watching others, and until we understand why something is done, we mimic the actions of others to produce the desired results (ex: we open our mouth and put food in after our mother makes the motion). Not only do we learn through mimicry, but we also enjoy it. It is in combining our affinity for learning and imitation that

[50] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentic Hall, 1999), 314.

[51] Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe To Return to Our Beginnings,* 298.

drama can excel at teaching us lessons, as we can watch someone like ourselves (or better/worse) go through an experience to learn universal truths about human nature.

Knowing that we learn through imitation, Aristotle emphasizes that the most essential part of any tragedy is a well-conceived and well-executed plot. He notes structure is vital because tragedy "is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality."[52] In an edition of Camus's collected works Roger Quilliot notes, "It is quite true that with the novel and essay, poetic, or semi-philosophical, the theatre was for Camus a natural mode of expression. The essay explained, the novel described, or imposed a myth, the theatre was action, a conflict lived in gesture and movement."[53]

Camus loved the theater and held it in high esteem, noting: "to me the theatre is the highest of literary forms, and certainly the most universal." Camus echoes Aristotle's views on the educative potential of theater, arguing "Those who love the mystery of the heart and the truth concealed in human beings must come to the theatre; it is there that their insatiable curiosity receives at least partial gratification. Yes, believe me, to make the truth come alive, put it on a stage."[54] A study of Camus's plays is important because it allows Camus to illustrate how "the truth can come alive," and to judge whether it is worthy of imitation.

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[52] "The Internet Classics Archive: Poetics by Aristotle," The Internet Classics Archive | Poetics by Aristotle, accessed April 1, 2021, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html.

[53] "Il est bien vrai qu'avec le roman et l'essai, poétique, ou semi-philosophique, le théâtre, fut pour Camus un mode d'expression tout natural. L'essai expliquait, le roman décrivait, ou imposait un mythe, le théâtre était action, conflit vécu dans le geŝte et dans le mouvement." Roger Quilliot, "Albert Camus Et Le Théâtre," in *Théâtre, Récits, Nouvelles,* ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 1687; Translation mine.

[54] Albert Camus, "Why I Work in the Theatre," 9, 9.

Chapter 2. Absurdity

Nuptials: Camus's Early Expression of Absurdity

For Camus, the absurd stems from the human search for meaning. Humankind cares about its being and it searches for a sense of purpose or signification. This search is confounded by a world that is indifferent and silent. Moreover, the frustration of finding no answers in the search for meaning is compounded by the realization that humans are mortal.

In the face of the silence of the world and the mortality of human existence, Camus rejects the idea of an afterlife. Whatever meaning is found in human existence, he argues, is found in this life and this world. Indeed, a belief in an afterlife is among several false hopes that Camus refuses to indulge. He encourages humankind to learn to embrace this world and discover a love for life in the face of death. Although his most systematic explication of this understanding of absurdity can be found in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes of these themes in a series of lyrical essays entitled *Nuptials* some six years before *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The *Nuptials* are the work of the young Camus working through his ideas on absurdity before engaging them in a more systematic fashion in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger.* The *Nuptials* collection, first published in 1938, consists of four essays: "Nuptials at Tipasa," "The Wind at Djemila," "Summer in Algiers," and "The Desert." Each of the essays features a young Camus recalling his travels in Algeria and Italy and how they informed his understanding of the human condition.

The choice of the word "nuptials" signifies an intimate relationship, a loving relationship with the world. Camus is visiting his favorite places in Algeria and Italy and evoking a glimpse of our absurd marriage with that world, replete with the beauty of life and nature, as well as the

mortality of our existence. Camus notes: "Yet even here, I know that I shall never come close enough to the world."[1]

"The Wind at Djemila" brings humanity's mortality into focus. In this essay Camus recalls visiting the Roman ruins at Djemila and recognizing that the ruins remain, long after the empire had fallen. In the midst of the ruins and in the face of the reality of death, Camus notes: "What always amazes me, when we are so swift to elaborate on other subjects, is the poverty of our ideas on death." He goes on to say, "I tell myself: I am going to die, but this means nothing, since I cannot manage to believe it and can only experience other people's death."[2] Equipped with the knowledge that their time on Earth is transitory, humans must decide how to spend that time.

If the world will not provide us with answers, the temptation is to believe that answers will come from outside of the world. Camus rejects this idea, arguing that we must only live with what we know. In the essay "Summer in Algiers" Camus compliments the way locals live life without searching for a philosophical meaning or knowledge but taking in what the Earth has to offer. "There is nothing here for people seeking knowledge, education or self-improvement. The land contains no lessons. It neither promises nor reveals anything. It is content to give, but does so profusely."[3] Camus praises the Algerians for enjoying the pleasures of the present and not overly concerning themselves with a search for meaning or redemption in another life. Reinforcing both the absurdity Camus is depicting, as well as his affinity for the Greek tragic

[1] Albert Camus, "Nuptials at Tipasa," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 68.

[2] Albert Camus, "The Wind at Djemila," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 77, 78.

[3] Albert Camus, "Summer in Algiers," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 81.

perspective, he issues a lament: "only one thing is more tragic than suffering, and that is the life of a happy man."[4]

The tragedy of happiness stems from the transitory nature of human existence. Although happiness on this earth may be fleeting, it is not impossible. The path to meaning or happiness, according to Camus, lies in recognizing that any meaning is to be found in this life, not one to come. He is also antagonistic towards ideologies that ignore the hope for happiness in this present existence for a world to come: "For if there is a sin against life, it lies perhaps less in despairing of it than in hoping for another life and evading the implacable grandeur of the one we have."[5]

Camus is critical of hope because it is "tantamount to resignation. And to live is not to be resigned."[6] We see in this sentence hints at what will be elaborated on at some length in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and even later in *The Rebel*; the human tendency to hope for explanation or remedy for the pain and suffering of death. Hope can take many forms: from belief in an afterlife where one lives beyond death to the hope of philosophical systems that seek to place order on a world that is beyond our means of ordering.

The final essay in *Nuptials,* "The Desert," is largely based on Camus's visit to Italy in 1937. Although the essay chronicles travels outside of Algeria, Camus continues to elaborate on his understanding of the absurdity of the human condition and the means to cope with it. In the essay Camus criticizes "noble minds" for their obsession with the immortality of the soul. "[T]hey reject the body, the only truth that is given them, before using up its strength. For the

[4] Ibid., 91.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 92.

body presents no problems, or, at least, they know the only solution it proposes: a truth which must perish and which thus acquires a bitterness and nobility they dare not contemplate directly."[7]

Camus believes we can only rely on what we can ascertain and the main truth we know is that we will die. Knowing this, we must not rely on hope. "[T]he body knows nothing of hope. All it knows is the beating of its own heart. Its eternity consists of indifference." Camus's focus in these essays is to determine how best to live with life's harsh realities. He notes "[M]an, like the earth, defines himself as halfway between wretchedness and love."[8] Although humanity's time on Earth is limited by an ultimate fate and life is full of suffering, the Earth also affords humans the choice to live and to love, to experience the beauty of nature and of life. Though the marriage between humankind and the world can at times appear hostile, the nuptials are not in vain; humans are given one life and it affords them the chance to experience a myriad of pleasures if they only open themselves up to the opportunity.

The "desert" Camus describes is not simply an arid climate, but the desert of human existence. When the absurdity of the human condition first presents itself, things appear very dire, but once humanity gives up its search for meaning outside of the world and resolves to love this life in the face of death, one can see a chance for solace. Camus notes throughout *Nuptials* that all too often humans ignore the facticity of human existence by seeking a meaning that is not available. By doing this, one never truly lives. Noting the inscriptions on tombstones he saw in Italy, Camus laments the lost opportunities of the dead: "Nearly all of them, according to the

[7] Albert Camus, "The Desert," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 95.

[8] Ibid., 94, 95.

inscriptions, had resigned themselves to dying, doubtless because they accepted their other duties."[9]

Camus's response to absurdity in the *Nuptials* is to counsel a lucid revolt for life in the immediacy of the present: "A certain continuity in despair can give birth to joy. And when life reaches a certain temperature, our soul and our blood mingle and live at ease in contradiction, as indifferent to duty as to faith." Camus argues that the best way to survive the "desert" of human existence is to be fully aware of its absurd conditions but persevere in spite of the fact. Once humans learn to live with "the full anguish of their thirst" they find a world "peopled with the living waters of happiness."[10] While only in nascent form, and written in the context of lyrical presence in Algeria and Italy, the *Nuptials* only afford an introductory glimpse to Camus's notions of absurdity; but they give us a glimpse that he rarely, if ever, abandons it. A full view of the absurd is to be found in his later work of this period, namely, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*.

Systematically Confronting the Absurd: *The Myth of Sisyphus*

The lyrical essays in *Nuptials* highlight a young Camus outlining the experience of humanity's absurd condition. The essays emphasize the experience of the absurd without defining it. While the essays in *Nuptials* showcase Camus expressing the absurd condition, the early essays in *The Myth of Sisyphus* systematically describe the absurd and its consequences.

At the outset of the compilation Camus notes he is not outlining an absurdist philosophy, but providing "the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady."[11] This distinction is

[9] Ibid., 98.

[10] Ibid., 100, 105.

[11] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 2.

important. Camus is closely associated with absurdity, but he merely takes absurdity as his starting point for determining human action in the world.

For Camus, the fundamental question of philosophy is "Judging whether life is or is not worth living." He argues that all other questions are secondary to this question. Camus wants to use the essays to explore "the relationship between individual thought and suicide."[12] He raises the question of suicide at the outset of the book because it naturally arises when one confronts the intellectual malady of absurdity.

Humanity naturally seeks meaning to its existence. Unfortunately, humans find themselves occupying a world that offers no meaning and is indifferent to the search for meaning and understanding. The frustration of the human condition is further complicated by the recognition of human mortality. Knowing one will die and will die without answers to the meaning of their existence, Camus believes it is only natural that the question of suicide should arise for humans.

When discussing the problem of suicide, it is important to know exactly what the absurd is. The absurd is not found explicitly in the human mind or in the world. Camus notes: "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation."[13] Due to this fact, Camus makes the argument that committing suicide does nothing to settle the absurd; it merely removes one of the elements (human life) from the equation. Camus believes that if something is true you must preserve it and "If I attempt to solve a problem, at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the

[12] Ibid., 3, 4.

[13] Ibid., 30.

problem."[14] The solution to absurdity stems from recognizing it and dealing with its consequences.

Having noted that physical suicide is not a solution to the absurd, Camus begins to tackle the problem of philosophical suicide. Philosophical suicide involves avoiding the absurd through the force of reason or hope. These "leaps" are similar to physical suicide in that they solve the problem of absurdity by changing its equation, either by extreme faith in human reason, or by hoping for another life and redemption in a world that is yet to come. Camus argues that the struggle against the absurd "implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)."[15]

Camus does not see the absence of hope as a reason to despair. He simply wants humanity to recognize that hoping in truths they cannot fully understand or believing in an afterlife that is not assured does not honestly confront the problem of absurdity. An authentic position towards the absurd will recognize the limits of reason and faith, and not bring in anything beyond immediate experience to provide meaning to life. He notes: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. […] I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand."[16]

Camus's insistence that humanity refuse hope does not mean that it should despair. It simply means that humans must strive to be comfortable living with only what they can know

[14] Ibid, 31.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 51.

through lived experience. The task now arises to learn how to confront the absurd without appeal to outside forces. While a future without hope sounds bleak, Camus argues that leaving hope behind and becoming fully conscious of the absurd condition is liberating: "[a] man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future."[17]

Camus's solution to absurdity is not removing any parts of the equation but continuing to live fully aware of the cruel calculus of life. He believes that life does not need a meaning to be lived, the experience of being alive is enough. Of course, Camus is not arguing that one acknowledge the absurd and then go back to their day-to-day routine, this would be another form of philosophical suicide. Camus's solution to the problem of absurdity is revolt: "That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."[18]

Camus believes that revolt is what gives life its value. Living without hope and with full knowledge that one will die helps to restore "majesty" to life. "To impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man's majesty is tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time." Systems that impose meaning on the world or offer redemption in another life have the effect of limiting human freedom because people adapt themselves "to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and become the slave of [their] liberty."[19]

When one stops living with an eye towards an idealized future, they become available to fully live in the present. "The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man."[20] An authentic orientation towards the absurd

[17] Ibid., 32.

[18] Ibid., 54.

[19] Ibid., 55, 58.

[20] Ibid. pg. 63-64.

will focus on the everyday existence of human being, particularly the lived world of human being, or life itself, in the immediacy of the world. Without hope or despair, without rational constructs of meaning for this world or the next, and in the face of mortality, human being itself is to be nurtured and lived. If there is a rebellion to be found here, it is the rebellion for life, for this world. Camus upholds Sisyphus as the ideal image of this stance.

Sisyphus as Absurd Hero

To best understand Camus's choice of Sisyphus as the Greek figure representing absurdity, it is important to review Sisyphus as portrayed in Greek myths and Camus's interpretation of the myth. Edith Hamilton notes that one day Sisyphus, King of Corinth, saw an eagle "greater and more splendid than any mortal bird"[21] heading towards an island close to Corinth. The king noticed that the great bird had a maiden in its grasp. Some time later, the river-god Asopus approaches Sisyphus and informs the king that Asopus's daughter Aegina had been carried away. Asopus tells Sisyphus that he suspects Asopus's daughter has been taken by Zeus and asks Sisyphus for his assistance.

According to Hamilton, Sisyphus obliges Asopus and tells the river-god what he saw. Sisyphus's action incurs the wrath of Zeus, with Zeus punishing Sisyphus by having Sisyphus "try forever to roll a rock uphill which forever rolled back upon him." Hamilton notes that not only did Sisyphus get punished for telling Zeus's secret, he failed to help Asopus. When Asopus arrived at the island to rescue Aegina, Zeus drove Asopus away using his thunderbolt.[22]

Hamilton's account of Sisyphus is not the only one found in Greek mythology. Robin Hard notes that Homer alludes to Sisyphus in *The Iliad* "as the most cunning of men." Hard

[21] Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Penguin Group, 1989), 312.

[22] Ibid, 313, 313.

argues that in the later tradition Sisyphus is generally portrayed as an appealing rogue whose defining characteristic is "craftiness."[23] Hard's accounting of the myth expands on the one given by Hamilton, explaining that Sisyphus's story did not end as simply as first thought.

According to Hard, Sisyphus did not provide information to Asopus for nothing, Sisyphus provided information in exchange for a spring in Corinth. This angered Zeus so much that he sent Thanatos (death personified) to take Sisyphus to the underworld for punishment. Being clever, Sisyphus was able to chain Death, making it impossible for anyone to die until Ares freed death and delivered Sisyphus to the underworld.

The gods would not prove victorious just yet as Sisyphus had concocted another scheme to avoid the underworld. Before departing for the underworld, Sisyphus had asked his wife not to give him a proper burial. Upon his arrival in the underworld he appealed to Hades and Persephone "to be allowed to make a brief visit to the upper world to remind his wife of her duties."[24] Sisyphus escapes to the upper world via this scheme, but he refused to return to the underworld, remaining at Corinth until he died from old age.

In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus recalls these three stories of the King of Corinth before providing his own interpretation of the myth. The first involves Sisyphus witnessing Jupiter kidnapping the daughter of Asopus and letting Asopus know what happened in exchange for water for Corinth. Camus later tells us that Homer noted that Sisyphus was punished by the gods for putting Death in chains and Pluto, being unhappy presiding over an empty underworld, dispatched the god of war to free Death. Camus's final story says that Sisyphus wanted to test his wife's love and asked her to deny him burial rights. She honored his

[23] Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology: Based on H.J. Rose's Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 430, 431.

[24] Ibid., 431.

wishes and Sisyphus used this affront as an excuse to return to the world of the living so he could chastise his wife. Once back among the living, Sisyphus remembers his love of life and refuses to go back to the underworld until he is finally returned by Mercury and shown to his rock.

Although Camus's recounting of Sisyphus's adventures do not align exactly with those of Hamilton or Hard, they all highlight his cleverness and highlight that "he is accused of a certain levity in regards to the gods. He stole their secrets." Each of the stories Camus tells us about Sisyphus portrays qualities Camus believes should be emulated if we are to authentically confront the absurd. Sisyphus betrays Zeus's secret kidnapping of Aegina in exchange for water for his kingdom. Camus observes: "To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water."[25] This simple story highlights that Sisyphus prefers happiness in this world, even at the risk of divine repercussions.

Camus's interpretation of The Myth of Sisyphus focuses on Sisyphus laboring with his rock. The gods sentenced Sisyphus to an eternity of pushing a rock up a hill, only to have the rock roll back down the hill as soon as he finishes moving it up. Camus notes that the gods believed this punishment was good for Sisyphus because "They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."[26] Camus upholds Sisyphus as the absurd hero because he represents human destiny; a lifetime of experiences and labor that are guaranteed to end in death, regardless of any actions one may take. Although Sisyphus's fate is set, Camus argues that he can take some revenge on the gods by becoming conscious of his struggle and embracing it as his own. Camus notes: "The lucidity that was to

[25] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 119, 119.

[26] Ibid.

constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."[27]

Camus believes that acknowledging the absurdity of the human condition is the first step in recovering some sense of meaning. He notes: "But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged." Camus imagines Sisyphus happy because Sisyphus comes to learn that his toil is his own and finding some joy in his experience will help him find some happiness, thus relieving the gods's punishment of some of its sting. Camus encourages us to acknowledge the absurdity of the world, but not let death have power over our entire life. He reminds us that Oedipus, at the end of his life, still concludes things are well because he had been alive: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well."[28] Camus's interpretation of The Myth of Sisyphus asks us not to lament Sisyphus's torture, but acknowledge Sisyphus's zest for life and his defiance of his fate by finding solace in his punishment. While Sisyphus serves as an ideal of an authentic human response to absurdity, the characters Camus presents in *The Stranger, Caligula,* and *The Misunderstanding* fall short of this ideal in several ways.

The Stranger

Camus first garnered significant public attention upon the release of his novel *The Stranger* in 1942. The novel opens with a young French Algerian clerk named Meursault receiving a telegram from his mother's care home that she has died. Meursault has a muted reaction to his mother's passing but goes to the home for the funeral. The night before the funeral Meursault keeps vigil over his mother's body but does not appear to be mournful.

[27] Ibid., 121.

[28] Ibid., 122, 122.

Meursault spends the day after his mother's funeral at the beach in Algiers where he strikes up a romance with a former co-worker named Marie. The two spend the entire day together, at the beach, then the movies, and finally the night at Meursault's apartment.

After returning from work the Monday after his mother's death, Meursault is stopped by his neighbor Raymond who offers to cook Meursault dinner. Although he claims to be a warehouse guard, it is well known amongst the neighbors that Raymond makes a living as a pimp. Over dinner Meursault notices that Raymond has a bandage on his hand. Raymond explains that he had gotten the wound during an altercation with his former mistress's brother. Raymond tells Meursault the story behind the altercation, explaining that it stemmed from Raymond beating his mistress after he found out that she had been having an affair.

Raymond asks Meursault if he thinks the woman had been cheating on Raymond and if he was right to be upset about her cheating on him. Meursault explains that you can never really know if someone has been cheating, but he agrees that Raymond is right to be upset. Later that evening Raymond tells Meursault about his plan to get revenge on his mistress. Raymond plans to write the woman a letter that will coax her back to his apartment and after he finishes sleeping with her, he is going to spit in her face and kick her out of the apartment. Raymond says he is not a good writer, so he enlists the help of Meursault. Meursault agrees to write the letter because he had no reason to disappoint Raymond.

A few days later Meursault and Marie are in Meursault's apartment when they hear commotion coming from Raymond's apartment. Raymond had spit in the woman's face, but she struck him in return, which led to his beating the woman again. The police arrive and break up the altercation, telling Raymond he must await a summons from the police to explain himself. Raymond enlists Meursault to tell the police that the woman had cheated on him.

Days after the altercation, Raymond invites Meursault and Marie to his friend Masson's beach house. The group heads to the beach that weekend, but as they are going towards the bus stop Raymond points out that his mistress's brother and one of his friends is watching them. The men do not appear to follow them to the bus stop. Meursault and some of his friends go for a swim before lunch and do not see the men. After lunch Masson, Meursault, and Raymond head to the beach for a walk. The three men run into the two Arab men from before and get into a violent altercation which leads to one of the Arabs cutting Raymond with a knife. Later that day Raymond storms out of Masson's house in a hurry. Meursault goes after him.

While they are walking on the beach, Meursault notices that Raymond has a gun. Meursault convinces Raymond to give him the gun when they see the Arab men, telling Raymond that if the men try and attack, he will shoot them. Nothing happens and Meursault and Raymond head back towards Masson's house. Raymond goes back into the house, but Meursault returns to the beach where he stumbles upon the man Raymond had been quarreling with lying on the beach alone. The man notices Meursault and draws his knife. Blinded by the sun and squinting through drops of sweat, Meursault pulls the trigger and shoots the Arab man. Meursault then shoots the man four more times.

Meursault is arrested and put into prison. Meursault says he "was questioned several times, but it was just so they could find out who I was, which didn't take long." Meursault thought his case was pretty simple but the examining magistrate notes it is only Meursault's opinion that the case is simple and "the law is the law." Meursault decides to trust a court-appointed attorney to handle his case. The attorney tells Meursault that the case is a tricky one, but he is confident they can win if Meursault will trust him. During their first meeting the lawyer asks Meursault if he had felt sadness at his mother's funeral. Meursault is taken aback by

the question and tells his lawyer that he "had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing [himself]."[29] Meursault finds it hard to answer the question but that he had probably loved his mother, although that did not mean anything. Meursault confesses to his attorney that his nature was such that his physical needs often got in the way of his feelings. Meursault tells his attorney that none of this has anything to do with his case, but his attorney tells Meursault that he has obviously never had any dealings with the law.

Meursault awaits trial for a year. During this time, he meets with his lawyer and the examining magistrate several times. The examining magistrate is puzzled by Meursault and his behavior. He encourages Meursault to turn to God for redemption, but Meursault says he does not believe in God. The magistrate tries several times to get Meursault to show some concern for his own fate, but the magistrate's actions are in vain. In the wake of Meursault's indifference, he begins to act only formally towards Meursault, and let Meursault's case run its natural course.

When the day of his trial arrives, Meursault arrives in the court room and admits that he felt like the "odd man out, a kind of intruder." The people in the courtroom are carrying on friendly conversations with one another until the bell rings and the court session begins. At the start of the trial the judge asks questions that might be relevant to Meursault's case and this includes questions about Meursault's mother, which irritates Meursault. The prosecutor eventually asks Meursault if he intended to go back to the spring to kill the Arab. Meursault says he had no intention to kill, "it just happened that way." Witnesses are called and the prosecution makes the case that Meursault is a monster because he failed to properly grieve his mother. The prosecutor tells the jury that the emptiness in Meursault's heart could become "an abyss

[29] Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 63, 63, 65.

threatening to swallow up society."[30] The jury finds Meursault guilty and sentences him to death by hanging.

As a convicted man Meursault wonders if anyone had ever been able to break free before their execution. He also ponders the nature of the justice system and how they could be so certain of someone's guilt that they sentenced them to death. He says that he cannot "accept such arrogant certainty." During the wait for his execution Meursault continually refuses to meet with the prison chaplain. One day the chaplain arrives in Meursault's cell unannounced and asks him to ask God to forgive his sins. Meursault repeatedly tells the chaplain that he does not believe in God and points out that it was not God who had sentenced him to death, it was society. The chaplain continues his pleas until Meursault finally loses his patience, grabbing the chaplain and yelling at him. In his anger Meursault is convinced that he was right to have lived his life the way he had because "nothing mattered." Once the two men are separated, the chaplain simply looks at Meursault with tears in his eyes. Meursault feels cleansed by his outburst because he felt it allowed him to open himself "to the gentle indifference of the world."[31] The novel ends with Meursault standing firm in his conviction that nothing in the world mattered and welcoming the scorn of the crowd at his execution.

In some sense, summarizing *The Stranger* defies Camus's aim with the novel as a summary recounts the book's events in a way that implies causality, even though the book is really Meursault simply recounting a sequence of events in his life. The book does not explain the things that are occurring in Meursault's life, nor does it explicitly argue a particular point of view. Camus's aim with the novel is to invoke the mood of the absurd. John Cruickshank points

[30] Ibid., 84, 88, 101.

[31] Ibid., 109, 121, 122.

out that Meursault is such a jarring character for readers to encounter because Meursault differs so much from what readers usually expect from first person narrators. In *The Stranger* a reliable narrator is "replaced by a world of incoherence, a world where rational analysis has little scope and where moral purposes and responses are conspicuously absent."[32]

In Meursault Camus presents readers with a description of a man who proceeds through life from moment to moment, with no analysis of the consequences of his own actions. The title *The Stranger* is appropriate for the book because it highlights the different ways Meursault is estranged from society and human existence. Sartre notes that "the stranger is man confronting the world", "The stranger is also man among men", and finally "the stranger is […] myself in relation to myself, that is natural man in relation to mind."[33] The entire book is used to highlight humanity's place as an exile in a world that is silent and indifferent to its search for meaning. *The Stranger*'s narrative is sparse, with little explanatory detail and no philosophical musings. On one level this represents the initial human encounter with the world. We are unable to find immediate meaning or value to our existence.

The Stranger is also a book that showcases the way an indifference to the world and unexamined existence can lead to exile within society. Meursault does not seek to form meaningful relationships; he seemingly stumbles into them. His only goal with most of his relationships is making sure he does not upset the other person; evidenced by his assisting Raymond with his nefarious deeds and agreeing to marry Marie if that is what she really wants.

Finally, *The Stranger* highlights the tragedy that can occur when humans refuse to utilize their agency to examine their own life. Throughout the novel Meursault never begins the first

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[32] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 152.

[33] Jean-Paul Sartre, "An Explication of *The Stranger*," in *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 110.

step towards recognizing the absurd…thinking. He never stops to think about his existence, yet alone if it has any meaning. While thinking and seeking meaning is both a blessing and a curse for humanity, Meursault's thoughtlessness exiles him from any chance at happiness because he does not examine his life or his relationships with others.

After Meursault is first arrested, the examining magistrate meets with Meursault in the magistrate's office and asks Meursault if he believes in God. Meursault says that he does not. The magistrate is puzzled by Meursault's response and proceeds to tell Meursault that every man, even those who have turned their back on Him, believe in God. Meursault's atheism is not what stands out the most about this exchange. It is what his responses to the pleas of the magistrate say about him.

Meursault admits that he "found it very hard" to follow the magistrate's reasoning, not because it involved any sort of philosophical leap to explain the human condition, but because it was "hot" in the office, there were flies landing on his face, and because the magistrate was scaring him. This sequence again highlights Meursault's thoughtlessness and shows that he has never considered the question of transcendence or whether life has a meaning. Of course, to accept hope in the form of the promise of another life would be committing philosophical suicide, so Meursault cannot be faulted for his refusal to believe in God, although his refusal appears more from a lack of consideration of transcendence at all than a considered atheism. Meursault can be faulted for his thoughtlessness and how it has led to his ignorance of human love.

The novel opens with Meursault learning of his mother's death. Right away, he notes that he is unsure if his mother died the day he received the telegram or the day before. For Meursault, it did not matter. Although the date of her passing is not significant, the fact that

Meursault is unconcerned with the details of her death highlights his emotional distance from his mother. Meursault's indifference towards his mother is further highlighted in his viewing the funeral and burial as obligations he must fulfill, rather than a chance to grieve his mother. He casually mentions that he hardly visited his mother once he placed her in the care home because visiting her meant losing his Sunday and by the time he had placed her there they "didn't expect anything from each other anymore."[34]

Meursault's relationship with Marie is another example of his exile from meaningful human relationships. Just before Raymond and his lover get into their quarrel, Marie asks Meursault if he loves her. He tells her that "it didn't mean anything" but he "didn't think so."[35] After work the night that Raymond invites Meursault and Marie to Masson's beach house, Marie again asks Meursault for clarification of his feelings for her. She asks him if he would like to marry her. Once again, he says it makes no difference to him but that he would marry her if she wanted, even though he did not think he loved her. He is indifferent towards love and ignorant of the insulting nature of his offer to marry Marie even though he does not love her.

Meursault's relationship with Raymond is what leads towards his killing of the Arab on the beach. This relationship is buttressed by Meursault's indifference towards friendship. Meursault seemingly knows that Raymond is not very popular in the neighborhood, but Meursault still interacts with him because he finds what Raymond has to say "interesting" and Meursault does not have "any reason not to talk to him."[36] The two men can really be

[34] Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, 88.

[35] Ibid., 35.

[36] Ibid., 28.

considered acquaintances at best, but Meursault's indifference towards human relationships allows him to become complicit in Raymond's scheme for revenge.

After Raymond has explained his plan for revenge on his mistress, he asks for Meursault's assistance and advice by offering for the two of them to be "pals"[37] after Meursault helps. Raymond recounts the entire backstory and scheme to Meursault and Meursault has no real thoughts on the situation other than that he found it interesting. Meursault writes Raymond's letter just as it came to him, but he tried his best to please Raymond because he had no reason not to please him. Meursault's indifference towards friendship leads to his becoming complicit in a scheme with an abuser and leads to the fatal encounter with Raymond's mistress's brother. His indifference towards human relationships ends up leading to his conforming with Raymond's scheme, a scheme that Meursault pays the ultimate price for, not Raymond.

At his trial, Meursault's indifference to love and friendship leads to his conviction, as several witnesses recount his reaction to his mother's passing. The first witness called by the prosecution is the director of the care home where Meursault's mother lived. The director explained that he was surprised by Meursault's calm over his mother's death. The director testified that Meursault had not wanted to view his mother's body and had left town immediately after the funeral, never paying final respects to his mother at her gravesite.

Two other witnesses, the caretaker of the home and Mrs. Meursault's lover, Thomas Pérez, take the stand for the prosecution. The prosecution has the caretaker explain that Meursault smoked a cigarette and drank coffee during his mother's vigil. The prosecution has Thomas Pérez explain that he never saw Meursault cry while he was laying his mother to rest. Although Meursault's attorney calls witnesses to help Meursault's case, their statements are in

[37] Ibid., 29.

vain. During the trial it becomes clear that the prosecution is trying to convict Meursault for his indifference to the rules of society as much as his killing the Arab.

During the trial Meursault admits that he did not feel much remorse over the killing of the Arab. He wishes he could cordially explain to the prosecutor that he "had never been able to truly feel remorse for anything" and that his mind "was always on what was coming next, today or tomorrow."[38] It is at this point it becomes extremely clear that Meursault was not only guilty of killing the Arab, but guilty of an apathetic nihilism. Meursault is a man that lacks pathos.

Eric Voegelin was sympathetic to Camus's work and his refusal to indulge in leaps that help explain the world to humanity. For Voegelin, Camus's recognition of the hope of salvation from beyond or through history served as "awareness of suffering a shadowy life" which "constituted the low point of turning around, the *periagoge*, from where the ascent from the cave to the light can begin."[39] Eubanks and Petrakis argue that Camus's project can be considered an effort to symbolize "the politics of pathos."[40] Meursault represents the starting point of this effort as he is a man who lives as though nothing matters; he does not care about his own being enough to search for a sense of purpose or signification.

Meursault says himself that he was always focusing on what was coming next, meaning he never took time to reflect on his actions. Germaine Brée notes that "He acts in a human situation as though human relationships, and therefore, responsibilities, do not exist."[41] In the character of Meursault, Camus presents us with a human being who lives his life without

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[38] Ibid., 100.

[39] Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, trans. Gerhart Niemeyer (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 170.

[40] Peter A. Petrakis and Cecil L. Eubanks, eds., *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*: *Searching for Foundations* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 177.

[41] Germaine Brée, *Camus* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 112.

utilizing his capacity to reason to recognize the suffering all humans encounter. Brée correctly argues that Meursault's "initial mental attitude proves inadequate to cope with even the simplest of lives."[42] *The Stranger* shows that indifference is not a way to interact morally with the world. Meursault's thoughtlessness leads to his being indifferent over his mother's death, over love, and over friendship. The problem is that this indifference eventually has consequences. At some point one must account for their actions.

Camus argued "In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral risks being sentenced to death."[43] Meursault acts as if nothing in the world matters. He lives moment to moment, never reflecting on the meaning of his existence. Meursault's unquestioning nature is what dooms him. Camus, speaking of Meursault, notes: "[H]e limits himself to *answering questions*."[44] Brée points out the deadly consequences of this type of existence: "The very essence of *l'absurde* [absurdity] in his case is that out of indifference he linked forces with violence and death, not with love and life."[45]

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus upholds Sisyphus as the ideal of an absurd hero. In *The Stranger,* he portrays a man who falls short of being an absurd hero. Sisyphus was fully conscious of his limited fate but found joy in his struggle despite knowing how it would end. After being sentenced to death, Meursault still maintains his indifferent outlook towards human existence, seeing in himself the same "gentle indifference" found in the world. Meursault's indifference leads to his conformity with Raymond's revenge scheme and eventually his killing the Arab with little remorse. Camus's next absurd work, the play, *Caligula*, portrays someone

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[42] Ibid.,116.

[43] Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 208.

[44] Albert Camus, *Notebooks:1942-1951*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 19.

[45] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 116.

who is fully aware of the absurdity of life and instead of being indifferent towards life, tries his best to change the order of things to make up for the world's indifference to the human search for meaning.

Caligula

Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars* inspired Camus's *Caligula.* The play consists of four acts and chronicles the reign of the Roman Emperor Caligula after the death of his sister, and lover, Drusilla. In the wake of his sister's death, Caligula departs Rome for three days, returning a changed man. Drusilla's death deeply disturbs Caligula, leading not only to his physical departure from Rome, but a mental departure from his once "conscientious"[46] self. The play shows how this departure from conscientiousness leads Caligula from promising young emperor to a ruthless tyrant who is eventually murdered by his terrorized subjects.

Caligula's combining kinship and lover in the single person of Drusilla meant that her death effectively amounted to his losing two people he deeply cared for. In his absence, the patricians of Rome anxiously await their emperor's return because up until that time he had been "perfection's self," combining conscientiousness with inexperience; a combination that had been beneficial for the patricians. One of the patricians, Cherea, is fearful that the emperor is "too fond of literature" and his sister's death will lead to Caligula forgetting his obligations as a public servant. The other patricians dismiss Cherea and note that Caligula is still young enough that they would be able to "make him see reason"[47] and continue to serve the public interest well.

The reality of the capriciousness of death upends Caligula's world, immediately presenting him with the truth of the absurdity of human existence. Just before Caligula fled

[46] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays,* trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 4.

[47] Ibid, 4, 5, 6.

Rome one of the patricians had noticed Caligula had a "queer look in his eyes." The patrician asked Caligula what was wrong, and Caligula replied with one word, "Nothing."[48]

Caligula returns to the palace adorning muddied clothes on his body and a distressed look on his face. Helicon, Caligula's assistant, is the first to spot the returned emperor. Helicon observes that the emperor is stressed and inquires about the emperor's three-day absence. Caligula tells Helicon that he was unable to find what he was after: the moon. Caligula remarks that even though he sounds crazy, he has "never felt so lucid" and he had "suddenly felt a desire for the impossible." The emperor has returned dejected because he realizes "Things as they are, in my opinion, are far from satisfactory."[49]

Caligula's words betray his true feelings. He has returned to Rome in a state of madness. His new "lucidity" has given him the idea to try and obtain the impossible, to change the nature of reality by dealing directly with death. Helicon agrees that Caligula's sentiment is not unwarranted, the order of things is less than satisfactory, but Helicon reminds the emperor it is not possible to change the truth of the world. Caligula argues that the impossible is possible, it simply requires the will to follow the logic necessary to obtain the end.

The anxious patricians see their returned emperor and immediately ask him to return to the affairs of state. The palace attendant informs Caligula of the anxiety they had been experiencing and is eager for Caligula to address concerns with the treasury which the attendant considers of cardinal importance. At this point Caligula begins to outline his new outlook on life, "Everything's important" and "everything's on an equal footing."[50] To prove his point,

[48] Ibid., 3.

[49] Ibid., 8, 8.

[50] Ibid., 11.

Caligula first addresses the treasury's importance by outlining a two-part plan. The first is a decree that all property owners are to disinherit their children and leave all their property to the State. The second part of his plan is to murder the property owners, so the State inherits their property when the state needs it.

This sudden change in temperament shocks two people who know Caligula well: his mistress, Caesonia, and his friend, the poet Scipio. Caesonia believes Caligula must be joking, but he tells her that he is simply working to make the "impossible possible" by "[tampering] with the scheme of things." Scipio warns Caligula that such extreme action is "a lunatic's pastime." Caligula corrects Scipio and argues that his new outlook on life represents "An emperor's vocation." Caesonia, ever loyal to Caligula, prophetically laments "I doubt if this discovery of yours will make us any happier."[51]

The second act of the play opens three years after Caligula's return. His discovery has brought a reign of terror to Rome. Caligula has decided to use his power to try and change the order of the world, oblivious to the irony that his challenge to death is resulting in a pile of corpses. Caligula mistreats the patricians: insulting them in public, confiscating their property, forcing their wives to work in brothels, and murdering them on a whim. Caligula has created a kingdom of fear and the patricians are ready to overthrow him. Just before the patricians head to the palace to murder Caligula, Cherea persuades them otherwise.

Cherea is a man of letters and advises the patricians to be patient and not underestimate Caligula. Cherea argues that the men must see Caligula's motives not as petty, but as part of a purposeful quest to carry out his theories to their end. This quest is dangerous because it is guided by a philosophy that Cherea says is "logical from start to finish."[52] Cherea recognizes the

[51] Ibid., 13, 16, 13, 14.

danger Caligula poses, but he also recognizes that the political moment to strike has not yet arrived. Killing Caligula too early could prevent the masses from being sympathetic to the patricians's cause.

Caligula arrives to Cherea's house just after Cherea and the patricians finish discussing Caligula's assassination. Caligula would like the men to join him in a feast before he goes to the execution he has planned for the day. Caligula is going to execute a knight named Rufius. No one in the room asks Caligula why he is executing him and Caligula applauds them for learning from their emperor, noting "It has dawned on you that a man needn't have done anything for him to die."[53]

Caligula's madness has seen him adopt the capriciousness of death as his own. He ignores common rules of conduct and manners, doing whatever he pleases. If he wants to sleep with someone's wife, he makes the man send her to him. He forces citizens to fill the coffers of the national brothel by creating "The Badge of Civic Merit" to be awarded to those who frequent the national brothel the most. Caligula determines that anyone who has not been awarded the badge within a year is to be exiled or executed. To emulate absurdity, Caligula calls for the public granaries to be closed. Causing a national catastrophe in the form of a famine is one more way for the powerful Caligula to prove that he is free.

Act two ends with Caligula asking Scipio to recite a poem for him. Scipio is hesitant because he is angry with Caligula for executing his father as part of implementing his new system. Scipio discusses his poem on nature with Caligula. As Scipio is reciting his poem, Caligula appears to be completing his thoughts for him, as if the two shared the same feelings

[52] Ibid., 21.

[53] Ibid., 24.

about nature. Once Scipio is finished, Caligula reveals that he does not share Scipio's views on love and find's Scipio's poetry lacking. Scipio is upset that he has opened his heart to Caligula only to have his former friend mock him and accuse him of lacking spirit. Scipio questions if Caligula has anything in his life that brings him consolation and Caligula tells him he does; he has scorn. The once conscientious emperor has given up seeking pleasure in the things of this world, focusing on fulfilling an appetite he admits nature can never sate.

By the third act Caligula has moved beyond dismissing social norms and the pleasures of nature. He has set his sights on replacing the gods. The act opens with Caligula putting on a performance as Venus, promising those in attendance that he would reveal "the secrets of the gods." Caesonia leads the audience in the "adoration" of this god on Earth, asking them to recite lines such as "Teach us the indifference that kindles love anew" and "Make known to us the truth about this world – which is that it has none." After the performance, Scipio confronts Caligula and tells him that what he has done is blasphemy. Caligula tells Scipio that his performance was another step towards freedom and that anyone can play the part of the gods if the person is committed to being "as cruel as they."[54]

Scipio disagrees with Caligula's argument, noting that "Hatred does not compensate for hatred" and "Power is no solution."[55] Caligula returned to Rome to do the impossible. In his madness he is aiming to conquer death by expressing his freedom any way he pleases and killing anyone he wishes in order to play the role of the gods. When Scipio points out how deadly this plan has been, Caligula reminds Scipio that wars kill far more people than Caligula had. Scipio reminds Caligula that wars are at least fought for particular reasons and not simple whims.

[54] Ibid., 39, 40, 43.

[55] Ibid., 43.

Caligula reminds Scipio that he is simply choosing to play the part of fate and fate cannot be understood.

Later in the third act, one of the older patricians goes to Caligula and confesses that there is a plot to kill him. Caligula summons Cherea to the palace to confront him about the plot. Cherea does not deny that he has considered removing Caligula because Caligula has disturbed the world. Cherea reminds Caligula that happiness is impossible if one indulges all their whims in the name of freedom. Cherea recognizes that a complete leveling of values eliminates many chances at happiness and believes some actions are "more praiseworthy than others." Cherea admits that he does not hate Caligula, but regards Caligula as "noxious and cruel, vain and selfish." The emperor's expression of freedom has destabilized society and cannot be allowed to continue. After hearing this Caligula admits to Cherea that he has a tablet that serves as evidence of Cherea's sedition. Cherea expects to be punished, but Caligula burns the tablet. In burning the tablet Caligula is showing Cherea that he is more powerful than the gods. Caligula tells Cherea that "the gods cannot restore innocence without first punishing the culprit," but he can "absolve you and give you a new lease of hope"[56] with the simple action of burning the evidence.

The final act opens with Cherea asking Scipio if he is still going to help assassinate Caligula. Scipio admits that he cannot help because even if he killed Caligula his "heart would still be with him."[57] Scipio says that he suffers with Caligula and shares his pain, so he cannot assist with the assassination. Cherea accuses Scipio of taking Caligula's side but Scipio argues that he is never again taking anyone's side. Cherea confides in Scipio that he is most angry with Caligula for instilling despair into the heart of a young man like Scipio.

[56] Ibid., 52, 51, 54.

[57] Ibid., 55.

During the final act Caligula hosts a party for his personal friends, inviting Cherea, but not inviting Scipio. Cherea arrives at the palace and joins a few other patricians who have been assembled to witness Caligula perform a grotesque dance behind a curtain. Caesonia informs the men that the emperor had wanted them to share in an artistic emotion with him. She informs the men that anyone who was unable to share the emotion will be beheaded. Each of the men agrees that they have experienced the emotion, sparing their lives. Cherea leaves the palace immediately after the performance to gather people to the rebels's cause.

Some time after Caligula's dance Caligula hosts a poetry contest about death. Cherea asks Caligula if he is going to participate but Caligula refuses to, reminding Cherea "I made my poem on that theme long ago." Caligula's reign of terror and destruction in pursuit of the impossible has been his living work of art. He congratulates himself on being "the only true artist Rome has known – the only one […] – to match his inspiration with his deeds."[58]

Poet after poet steps forward and Caligula dismisses each one quickly until Scipio shows up. Reciting his poem without looking at Caligula, Scipio begins: "Pursuit of happiness that purifies the heart, Skies rippling with light, O wild, sweet, festal joys, frenzy without hope!" Caligula stops the competition immediately and declares Scipio the winner. He is pleased that Scipio has given in to despair and "come to understand so well the lessons we can learn from death."[59] As the competition ends Cherea gives the signal to begin the assassination. Scipio overhears this and before he departs, he tells Caligula to remember that he loved him.

Caesonia asks Caligula what Scipio said but Caligula tells her that she would not understand. At this point, Caligula acknowledges that the conspirators will soon be upon him.

[58] Ibid., 64, 65.

[59] Ibid., 66, 66.

Caesonia tells Caligula that she loves him and will defend him. She confesses to him how hard it has been to see him become so cruel and kill so many people on the path towards losing his humanity. Caligula responds to this outpouring of love by strangling Caesonia because she is one of the only people left who loved him and remembered his humanity. Just after Caesonia is killed, Cherea and Scipio burst into the palace and stab Caligula in the face. As he is being stabbed to death Caligula shouts "I'm still alive!"[60]

With Caligula's final defiant shout Camus reminds us that the human condition remains the same: Humanity seeks meaning to its existence but encounters an indifferent and silent world. The frustration of this encounter is compounded by the realization of human mortality. In response to this fact, Camus implores his readers not to despair of human mortality, but to view it as a chance to find happiness in this life and this world. If there is no afterlife to come and no rules to dictate life, humanity is available to pursue happiness immanently. *The Stranger* and *Caligula* portray errors in responding to absurdity, particularly when characters fail to recognize their chances at happiness on this Earth.

From the outset of *Caligula*, Camus portrays an opposite reaction to the death of a loved one as seen in *The Stranger*. Meursault did not cry at his mother's funeral. Caligula left Rome for three days after Drusilla died. From the time we first meet Caligula he is conscious of death and its impact on the human search for meaning. Meursault only became conscious of death after receiving the death penalty for a murder he did not regret. Even then, Meursault felt no need to apologize for his indifference to the world. While Meursault's indifference led him into an apathetic nihilism, Caligula's awareness of death leads him to practice an active nihilism.

Before Caligula fled Rome one of the patricians inquired into what was puzzling the

[60] Ibid., 74.

young emperor. Caligula responded simply: "Nothing."[61] In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus argues that at times humans respond to being asked what they are thinking with "nothing." He notes most times this is a mere pretense to avoid discussing whatever insignificant, ephemeral thought had come to mind. At other times, this response is the first recognition of the absurd and the discomfort that results from its realization. In the latter case, the reply of "nothing" "symbolizes that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity."[62]

Caligula's experience with death has changed him and opened his eyes to humanity's true condition. He confides to Helicon that his trip allowed him to discover "A childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth, but one that's hard to come by and heavy to endure." That truth is "Men die; and they are not happy." Caligula's response to this revelation is to seek the impossible. Caligula finds the state of the world as is "far from satisfactory"[63], so he will work to remake the world in his own image. Caligula's mission to remake the world is a form of philosophical suicide. He places his hope in being able to reform the world using his political power. Even though he may be able to decide whether his subjects live or die, Caligula will be unable to conquer death; indeed, his refusal to acknowledge immanent chances at happiness lead to his eventual murder by Romans who cannot tolerate the unpredictability his rebellion against death has brought to their lives.

Caligula's quest to remake the world is informed by his insistence that his "freedom has

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[61] Ibid., 3.

[62] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 12.

[63] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 8, 8, 8.

no frontier" and that "[t]his world has no importance." While Meursault's passive indifference posed a threat to society because he was able to become complicit in a revenge scheme and never thought about moral issues, Caligula's threat to Roman society was active. Caligula's encounter with death led to his awakening to the fact that despite what anyone does during their time on earth, they are going to die. Caligula recognizes that we are "all sentenced to death without a hearing." Caligula uses the existence of this death sentence to justify a campaign of terror in the name of expressing his own freedom while teaching the citizens of Rome that their ideas of happiness and virtue are simply "lies and self-deception."[64] Germaine Brée notes: "In the name of truth [Caligula] undertakes a peculiar form of ruthless and disinterested mental warfare upon his subjects. Caligula is now a man with a purpose – an educator not a tyrant – the would-be savior of humanity."[65]

Although Caligula tries to describe his leveling of values as simply bestowing upon his subjects "the gift of equality," he is displaying an active nihilism. As emperor, Caligula should have concern for the public well-being, but he is instead putting the public at risk simply to prove that the world has no meaning and people will die whether they live virtuous lives or not. Caligula's mistake stems from believing that the absence of a meaning to the world means that nothing in the world can be meaningful. Sprintzen notes that the focus should not be on "the metaphysical structure of things, but rather […] the existential quality of our lives."[66]

Caligula, despite all his political power, is still a human, therefore he is unable to change the metaphysical structure of the world. When he first returns to Rome, Caligula explains to

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[64] Ibid., 14, 17, 9.

[65] Germaine Breé, *Camus*, 163.

[66] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 67.

Helicon his desire for the impossible. In response to the intolerable scheme of things as they are Caligula "[wants] the moon, or happiness, or eternal life – something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world."[67] Caligula makes the mistake of believing that happiness is not to be found in this world. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Camus believed that the only meaning in human existence is to be found in this life and this world. Throughout the play, Caligula rejects chances at happiness by rejecting genuine human relationships.

Meursault was simply indifferent towards human relationships. Caligula actively shuns them because he views happiness as something that is impossible in this world. Three characters in the play represent three chances for Caligula to find happiness in human relations: Caesonia, Scipio, and Cherea. Caesonia, Caligula's mistress, "speaks for the body and for love."[68] Throughout the play, Caesonia tries to direct Caligula's attention to the simple joys that can be found in living. When Caligula first returns and announces his new logic, she encourages him to let himself "relax and, above all stop thinking."[69] Camus notes that the encounter with the absurd is followed by "the gradual return into the chain" or "the definitive awakening."[70] Caligula has been awakened to humanity's dismal fate. He cannot return into the chain and refuses to believe that the answers to his longing are found in love because to Caligula, love, like everything else in this world, means nothing.

Scipio represents a chance for Caligula to find happiness in the form of friendship with a kindred spirit. Before Caligula began his reign of terror, he and Scipio were friends. Caligula once told Scipio that life was not easy but had consolations such as "religion, art, and the love

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[67] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 8.

[68] Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 72.

[69] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 16.

[70] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays,* 13.

one inspires in others." Before his encounter with the absurd Caligula had believed "the only mistake one makes in life is to cause others suffering."[71] After his experience Caligula has turned his back on these notions and allowed his life to be ruled by scorn for humanity's situation. He refuses to indulge the comforts of art or nature in favor of trying to recreate the world to express his own freedom.

Cherea represents Caligula's intellectual equal. Cherea acknowledges the absurd but he refuses to draw the same conclusions from it as Caligula. Caligula is critical of Cherea for "[attributing] importance to people and to things." Cherea answers this by noting "since this world is the only one we have, why not plead its cause?"[72] Cherea recognizes the danger that Caligula's "logic" poses to society. Caligula's belief that everything is on an equal footing means that nothing can be considered truly important, therefore life and this world are drained of their meaning. Cherea represents a more authentic stance against the absurd than Caligula because Cherea acknowledges the absurd's existence but refuses to let that existence stop his search for happiness in this world.

In the end, Caligula rejects any of the relationships that would have helped provide "existential quality" to his life and instead becomes a "metaphysical rebel"[73] who tries to use his power and freedom to reshape the world to his own image. Caligula wants to prove his freedom by getting even with the gods by mimicking their cruelty towards humanity. Caligula recognizes that his freedom is coming at the cost of the happiness and lives of others, but he does not care. He notes: "One is always free at someone else's expense. Absurd perhaps, but so it is."[74] In

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[71] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 10, 10.

[72] Ibid., 14, 14.

[73] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 68.

[74] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 28-29.

Caligula readers can see the danger of metaphysical rebellion. In this instance the rebellion is personal, but in *The Rebel*, Camus describes the danger of metaphysical rebellion becoming part of a political ideology intent on transforming the world. As deadly as Caligula's metaphysical rebellion was to Rome, its destruction was limited by Caligula's personal whims. In *The Rebel* Camus shows how dangerous and deadly political ideologies that embrace metaphysical rebellion can be because their destructive power is not limited to one person, but embraced by an entire state and its apparatuses.

Meursault awaits the guillotine with no regret for his actions and no remorse over his indifference towards human life. Caligula recognizes that he made a fatal mistake by refusing to give importance to the people who populated his world. Camus notes: "Unfaithful to mankind through fidelity to himself. Caligula accepts death because he has understood that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others."[75]

Camus always maintained that he possessed a Greek heart. That Greek heart is on display in *Caligula*. The tragedy that befalls Caligula stems from his encounter with death after losing his beloved sister. Instead of finding refuge in the pleasures of this life provided by love and friendship, Caligula embarks on the impossible task of changing the metaphysical order of the world. Gilbert Norwood reminds us that a Greek hero was not necessarily heroic "through any nobility or holiness" in their life, but rather the way their awful crimes "were purged by strange sufferings and death, violent, superhuman, or pitiable."[76] Just before he is murdered Caligula comes to the realization that he has taken the wrong path: "I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one."[77] Meursault's passive indifference

[75] Ibid. vi.

[76] Gilbert Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (Boston: John W. Luce & Co., 1920), 136.

to the world led to his becoming indifferent towards humanity. Caligula's active rejection of the world led him to ignore relationships that could have increased the existential quality of his life. With his final absurd work, *The Misunderstanding*, Camus highlights the condition of exile common to all of humanity.

The Misunderstanding

The second play Camus produced during his absurd phase was *The Misunderstanding*. The play centers on a young man who left home to pursue a fortune, leaving behind his mother, father, and sister. The young man has made a new life for himself and has returned home to help his mother and sister after the death of his father. The mother and sister are running an inn that has been unprofitable for some time. The women have been able to keep the inn open by continuing a scheme that the family had started after Jan left, but before the father died. The scheme involves robbing wealthy men who are travelling alone. The women drug their victim's tea, causing the traveler to fall asleep. While the men sleep, the women take the men's possessions and after robbing the men of their valuables, they drop the slumbering men into a nearby river, sending the men to their deaths. The women assuage their guilt over murdering their visitors by reminding themselves that death eventually comes for everyone and a wealthy man with no family to depend on him has likely led a full life and is more expendable than the mother or her daughter.

Jan, the son, has returned home with a plan to rescue his mother and sister from their dull life. Jan has come back to his hometown with his wife, Maria. Maria begs Jan to disclose to his mother and sister who he is immediately upon his return, but he keeps delaying because he does not feel that the timing is right. Jan sends Maria away for a night so he can better understand his

[77] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 73.

mother and sister. Throughout the play tension builds as the mother has doubts about killing Jan. She has grown tired of the killing. The daughter, Martha, is more willing to carry out the deed, but she too has moments where she considers letting Jan go.

Unfortunately for Jan, his refusal to reveal who he is leads to his death, as Martha puts the drug in his tea and he falls asleep. The women carry out what they believe will be their last crime (they have now saved enough money to leave the country). It is not until the light of day that the women discover the truth of what they have done. A mother has killed her returning son; a daughter has killed her returning brother.

The morning after Jan's murder Maria arrives at the inn looking for her husband. She explains to the mother and daughter who she is. The reality of her misdeeds is too much for the mother and she kills herself. Martha is more bitter and tries to rationalize her actions. Eventually, though, she too cannot handle the tragedy and kills herself. The play ends with Maria appealing to the quiet servant for help. He refuses.

In *The Misunderstanding* Camus portrays two characters who are guilty of eluding recognition of their absurd situation. Both Martha and Jan are guilty of some form of hope that they stubbornly cling to, which leads to a tragic misunderstanding that results in the death of Jan and the suicides of Martha and her mother. As previously discussed, one of the key tenets of Camus's conception of the absurd is that hope must not be relied on to replace a true recognition of the absurdity of life. He argues against "Hope of another life one must 'deserve' or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it."[78]

[78] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 8.

Martha is guilty of putting her hope in a life she thinks she deserves outside of the dreary town in which she has grown. Not only does she feel justified killing travelers since they have had the chance to live and explore what the world has to offer, she believes that she has suffered and therefore deserves to move away to a town with a sunlit beach. Jan is guilty of hope that springs from an idealized family life. He is guilty of a nostalgia for a perfectly ordered world in which his mother and sister will happily greet him upon his return and allow him to fulfill his duty of rescuing them. The tragedy of the play is that the two siblings are at "cross purposes"; Martha needs only one more kill to start a new life, while Jan is waiting to save his mother and sister but waiting for the right moment to reveal his identity.

Though both characters share hope, the two have dissimilar experiences with the absurd condition of humanity. Martha recognizes the absurdity of life and uses it as justification for her crimes. John Cruickshank notes Martha "sees absurdity as the essential fact of existence and she bases her actions on its ineradicable nature."[79] Martha uses human mortality as justification for her crimes. She feels no remorse for murdering the inn's wealthy visitors; she takes their wealth as a sign that they have lived a contented life and mistakes their travelling alone as implying they have no importance to anyone else. Martha and her mother are convinced their method of killing is more humane than if someone were to have gone on living and potentially suffering: "Do you remember last year when we were watching them repair the sluices, how you said that ours suffered least, and life was crueler than we?"[80] Martha's consciousness of the absurdity of life, coupled with her false hope, is the deadly combination that sends her brother down the same path she had sent so many other lonely travelers.

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[79] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, 203.

[80] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 80.

Contrary to Martha, Jan is unaware of the absurdity of life. He is so caught up in his day-to-day life and a nostalgia for an idealized family life that he does not consider that his mother and sister may not recognize him. Cruickshank notes Jan "seeks happiness through confidence in existence rather than revolt against it," even though this confidence in "things that are" leads to his "[becoming] an unwitting vehicle through which the absurd works."[81] Although Camus's conception of the absurd insists that meaning found in human existence must be of this world, Jan appears oblivious to the toll that years of suffering may have had on his mother and sister. He was convinced he would be welcomed as a savior, but he was not.

Martha is like Caligula in that she recognizes the absurdity of existence and uses it as justification for murder. Martha takes from the absurd a freedom to seek her ideal life far away from the inn, even if this means murdering travelers. She takes the truth of human mortality and the absence of discernible meaning in the world as a signal that one is free to do as they please. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus argues: "if I admit that my freedom has no meaning except in relation to its limited fate, then I must say that what counts is not the best living but the most living."[82] Both Caligula and Martha are seeking the most living possible. The main difference is Caligula has the political power to maximize his living, while Martha must work towards her goals one killing at a time. In the end, Martha, like Caligula, realizes that her revolt against the absurd was flawed and led to unnecessary death, including the murder of her brother and the suicide of her mother.

Though he is the victim of murder, Jan is not completely without fault in *The Misunderstanding*. He is stubbornly committed to the idea of being recognized by his mother

[81] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, 204.

[82] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 60-61.

and sister and praised as their savior. He tells Maria: "I don't need them; but I realized they may need me, and a man doesn't live only for himself."[83] In the end, Jan's stubborn refusal simply to confess to his mother and sister that he has returned to take them away precipitates all of the death in *The Misunderstanding*. Though he claimed that a man does not live only for himself, Jan withheld his identity to satisfy his selfish need for recognition. Sprintzen is critical of Jan for this, noting: "[H]is project lacks mutuality. He does not listen to their speech. It is as if they were occasions for the fulfillment of his project."[84] In this sense, Jan is like Caligula in using others simply as parts of his own plan. At the root of both men's thinking is a selfishness that ends up being self-destructive.

Conclusion

As noted earlier in the chapter, Camus's absurd works, particularly the plays, present us with a picture of inhumanity, particularly the inhumanity that results from an improper response to the absurd. Cruickshank argues that *The Misunderstanding* "is very much a drama of human separation and exile. The theme of loneliness takes many forms and is particularly obvious in the case of both Martha and Jan."[85] The inhumanity each of Camus's absurd protagonists displays can be seen as resulting from their inability to recognize the exiled condition all of humanity shares.

Humanity stands alone in this world as the only creature that seeks meaning to its existence. Camus says: "If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be*

[83] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 84.

[84] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 82.

[85] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, 203.

this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation."[86] An honest confrontation with the absurd recognizes the true nature of the human condition and strives for happiness despite it, while refusing to indulge false hopes.

Sprintzen argues that *The Misunderstanding* represents a transitional work in Camus's corpus, and I agree. He notes that the tragedy of the play results from the failure of the characters to recognize "the commonality of their situation." Each of the characters blindly undertakes their own project without considering the other. "In their effort to impose their own world on the others, each encounters the other's similar and counter effort. Interwoven monologue has replaced dialogue, and tragic misunderstandings are inevitable."[87]

Although Sprintzen is referring specifically to Martha and Jan, the same sentiment applies to Meursault and Caligula. Meursault thinks only of himself and his day-to-day existence. He has given up the habit of self-analysis, so he definitely does not have the time to consider others. Meursault is a man who allows himself to be as indifferent towards humanity as the world itself. Caligula selfishly uses his political power to attempt to change the metaphysical order of the world. His actions are undertaken to express his personal freedom towards death, regardless of the toll it takes on his fellow Romans.

Just before she kills herself, Martha lays bare the truth of humanity's exile: "[N]either for him nor for us, neither in life nor in death, is there any peace or homeland."[88] Martha resents the human condition and reminds Maria that no grief of hers "could ever equal the injustice done to

[86] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 51.

[87] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination,* 81, 81.

[88] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 132.

man."[89] Failure to recognize the common exile of all of humanity results in much of the inhumanity seen in Camus's cycle on absurdity. Martha laments to Maria "That in the normal order of things no one is ever recognized."[90] Though Martha speaks these words from a place of bitterness and contempt, her words portray the solution that Camus offers in his second cycle of revolt; a recognition of common exile as a solution to humanity's inhumanity towards one another.

[89] Ibid., 133.

[90] Ibid., 132.

Chapter 3. Revolt

The Rebel of Olympus: Prometheus

As previously discussed, Camus conceptualized his work as comprising multiple stages, with each stage focusing on a particular theme and with a Greek figure symbolizing each of the themes. Sisyphus was Camus's absurd figure. Camus chose Prometheus as his exemplar of rebellion.

The story of Prometheus in Greek myth "was altered and developed significantly as time progressed," but we can identify two major sources of his story, the poet Hesiod and the playwright Aeschylus. Robin Hard notes that in the Hesiodic poems Prometheus advanced the interests of humanity in the classic understanding by giving fire to human beings and, as a result, was punished for eternity, chained to a rock so that an eagle could tear out his liver day after day after day. Hard notes that from Aeschylus onwards Prometheus was "the general benefactor (and sometimes even the creator and saviour) of the human race," eventually being freed from his punishment and reconciled with Zeus.[1]

Aeschylus is credited with further developing the myth of Prometheus through the play *Prometheus Bound.*[2] Aeschylus's play begins as Kratos and Bia (Might and Force) bring Prometheus forward to be chained to his rock. Hephaistos accompanies the two to forge the chains that will hold Prometheus, even though he "is far from enthusiastic about the task or about Zeus's manner of rule."[3] The immediate cause for Prometheus's punishment in the play is his stealing fire, although later in the play it is revealed that Zeus is also punishing Prometheus for

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[1] Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology: Based on H.J. Rose's Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 92, 92.

[2] The play is attributed to Aeschylus, but there is doubt that he wrote it himself. I will proceed as if Aeschylus did author the play.

[3] Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology,* 95.

other benefits he gave to mortals, including saving them "from being destroyed by a tyrannical Zeus who grudges their very existence."[4]

Among the things Prometheus taught humans were how to build houses from bricks and wood, how to domesticate animals, how to sail, how to read the skies to know which seasons to plant and which to harvest. Hard notes that "in short, [Prometheus] introduced or invented all the arts that raise human beings from a state of nature."[5]

Even though Zeus was powerful enough to exact revenge on Prometheus by chaining him to a rock, Prometheus knew a secret about Zeus. Aeschylus's play says that Prometheus's mother had told her son that if Zeus fathered a child by a certain mother (Thetis), the son that was born would be more powerful than his father. Zeus sent Hermes to Prometheus to extract the secret from Prometheus. The enchained deity remains defiant in the face of every threat and the play ends with Prometheus being cast down to Tartaros, a place beyond even Hades, which from the time of Plato and beyond was "the place of punishment or correction (or the worst part of it)."[6]

Prometheus Bound is likely the first play in a trilogy which was to consist of subsequent plays *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-bringer*. Unfortunately, no complete texts for *Prometheus Unbound* or *Prometheus the Fire-bringer* exist.

Camus was deeply influenced by Aeschylus's account of Prometheus's drama. In a notebook entry from February 1938, Camus argues "The spirit of revolution lies wholly in man's protest against the human condition."[7] In the entry, Camus cites Prometheus as one of the first to

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 96.

[6] Ibid., 23, 120.

[7] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1935-1942,* trans. Philip Thody (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010) 84.

revolt against the gods. A year before the notebook entry, a young Camus wrote an adaptation of *Prometheus Bound* for his Algerian theater group, the Théâtre du Travail, to perform. The group was communist-inspired and argued that sometimes art needed to "descend from its ivory tower…[and] restore some human values."[8]

Robert Zaretsky notes "In this cause, Camus found an ideal ally in Prometheus."[9] Camus discusses Prometheus in two particular works, both of which highlight his affinity for Prometheus because of his revolt against the gods in the name of human dignity: "Prometheus in the Underworld" and *The Rebel*. In "Prometheus in the Underworld" Camus is critical of modernity for placing too much emphasis on freeing the body without regard for its consequences on the human mind.

This modern notion of revolt is not in the spirit of Prometheus because it is destructive and can ignore the value of human life in favor of some promised future good. As A.J. Podlecki argues, Prometheus's rebellion against Zeus, "not only saved humans from total destruction, it enhanced immeasurably their mode of existence and made them more fully human." He notes that Prometheus's rebellion not only raised humans above the level of simple survival, but it also helped humans become "independent of the gods' whims."[10] Any revolt against the human condition that leads to unnecessary suffering dishonors Prometheus's rebellion.

In *The Rebel* Camus notes that "The first mythologies describe Prometheus as an eternal martyr, chained to a pillar, at the ends of the earth, condemned forever because he refuses to ask forgiveness." Camus argues that Aeschylus "endows him with lucidity" and "makes him cry out

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[8] Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 96.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Aeschylus, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*, trans. Anthony J. Podlecki (Oxford: Aris & Phillips, 2005), 27, 27.

his hatred of all the gods." For Camus, Prometheus's scorn of the gods and awareness of the potential for injustice at their expense is an example of humanity's nature to revolt. "Long before Satan, [the Greeks] created a touching and noble image of the Rebel and gave us the perfect myth of the intelligence in revolt."[11]

At this point, it is useful to indicate the similarities between Sisyphus and Prometheus and the reasons Camus preferred Prometheus as his mythological model for rebellion. The gods punish both Sisyphus and Prometheus for deceiving them. Sisyphus deceived the gods by plotting with his wife to deny him burial rights as an excuse to return from the underworld. He told the gods that he would return after confronting his wife, but he refused to return and only returned to the underworld after dying for a second time. Prometheus deceived Zeus by stealing fire and providing humans with knowledge of how to better human life.

In terms of understanding Camus's thought, the significant difference between the two is the reason for their rebellion. Sisyphus rebels against the gods in the name of life. His rebellion is for personal reasons and Camus's reinterpretation of the myth asks readers to view Sisyphus as happy with his fate. Although his personal fate is an eternity of pushing a boulder up a hill, Sisyphus can find comfort in his struggles and his scorn for the gods as he descends the hill of his punishment.

In Camus's unpublished adaptation of *Prometheus Bound*, the chained rebel laments: "The truth is that I can no longer bear to suffer and to be right."[12] Germaine Brée notes that even though this lament may invoke the image of the absurd human, Prometheus "is not a happy hero,

[11] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 26, 26, 26.

[12] Germaine Brée, Camus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 217. Brée quotes the adaptation without attribution.

and in this respect Sisyphus is to a certain extent anti-Promethean."[13] This shift from a happy hero to an unhappy one likely reflects Camus's mood after witnessing the atrocities of the second world war and the emerging Cold War. The shift also represents a recognition that any solution to the absurd may start with the individual, but it cannot end there. Sisyphus's rebellion was a personal one in the name of life; Prometheus's rebellion was undertaken to benefit all of humanity.

Camus's goal with "Prometheus in the Underworld" and *The Rebel* is to confront the problem of metaphysical rebellion. Sisyphus's revolt is limited because he is condemned to the underworld, but what if this "lucidity" and "hatred of all the gods"[14] is not restrained in the underworld? It is the danger of metaphysical revolt wishing to transform the modern world in the name of correcting creation that Camus warns against and examines in *The Rebel*. As he did in "Prometheus in the Underworld," Camus argues in *The Rebel* that our age has become Promethean in name only.

Modern revolutions ignore the final drama of Aeschylus's lost Promethean trilogy, *Prometheus the Fire-bringer*, which "proclaimed the reign of the pardoned rebel." Prometheus did not undertake a rebellion against all of creation, only against Zeus specifically. Camus argues that Prometheus's story is "a question of settling a particular account, of a dispute about what is good, and not of a universal struggle between good and evil."[15] Necessity forced Zeus and Prometheus to reconcile by meeting halfway. In *The Rebel,* Camus chronicles the danger

[13] Ibid.

[14] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*: An Essay on Man in Revolt, 26.

[15] Ibid., 27, 27.

that totalizing movements of justice pose to any sort of order that upholds human dignity, for which Prometheus fought and suffered.

Essays on Revolt: *Summer*

Robert Zaretsky notes that shortly after the publication of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942, Camus "concluded that he had to move beyond the absurd." Although Camus's notion of absurdity had been "an accurate diagnosis of the human condition,"[16] he also knew this diagnosis did not help France which was now under Nazi occupation. The occupation and Camus's participation in the resistance movement in France led him to work on a cycle devoted to the theme of rebellion.

During the years from 1939 until 1954, Camus worked on a series of essays eventually published as a collection under the title *Summer*. The essays in the collection highlight his transition from an artist concerned with humanity's metaphysical condition towards an artist struggling with the harsh reality of a second world war and an emerging Cold War. The first essay is "The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran." Camus began working on this essay in 1939, but it was not published until 1946. The essay recalls his work in *Nuptials*, highlighting the pleasures found in a life lived near the sea.

In the essay, Camus depicts Oran as a city without a past. It is in these cities one can truly escape and lose themselves in nature. He argues: "The cities Europe offers are too full of murmurs from the past" that remind one "of the clamor in which Europe was forged." Camus explains to us that "no one, on the boulevards of Oran, discusses the problem of Being, or worries about the way to perfection."[17] The Oranians find their pleasures in the simple joys of

[16] Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning*, 95-96, 96. Ibid.

[17] Albert Camus, "The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970)*,* 109, 115.

living, whether dressing up and promenading around the streets of their city or watching two men battle in a boxing ring.

In Oran it is tempting to "merge oneself with these stones, to mingle with this burning, impassive universe that challenges history and its agitations." For Camus, the key is to avoid the "deep instinct" found within every human "that is neither for destruction nor creation." That instinct is "Simply the longing to resemble nothing." Unfortunately, "Nothingness lies within our grasp no more than does the absolute."[18] As discussed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, if humanity was part of this world, then it could find true comfort in it, but reason (and the subsequent recognition of mortality) puts humanity at odds with the world. Camus's discussion of nothingness and the longing to live simply in the world turns out to be prescient, as the world plunged into war the year he began writing his essay. Other essays in the same collection begin to highlight humanity's struggle with its position in the cosmos and the destruction that it brought.

In "The Almond Trees" Camus explores ideas he will elaborate on in *The Rebel*. He argues: "I do not have enough faith in reason to subscribe to a belief in progress or to any philosophy of history."[19] He notes that even though humanity has come to better know its condition, it has not overcome it. The challenge is to recognize the contradiction of humanity's position (i.e. the absurd) while working to reduce it; in other words, metaphysical revolt can result from the recognition of the absurd. Taking action in response to the absurd can help reduce suffering, but it can also amplify it.

[18] Ibid., 130, 130, 130, 131.

[19] Albert Camus, "The Almond Trees," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 135.

Camus also argues that "Our task as men is to find the few principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls."[20] "The Almond Trees" concludes with Camus imploring a return to the virtues of the mind that Nietzsche argued would combat "the spirit of heaviness."[21] These virtues, undeveloped by Camus but foreshadowing the notion of sophrosyne, are strength of character, taste, the "world," classical happiness, severe pride, and the cold frugality of the wise.

The next essay in the collection, already mentioned in connection with the myth of Prometheus, "Prometheus in the Underworld," foreshadows Camus's discussion of authentic rebellion in *The Rebel*. Camus opens the essay by noting that even though one may hold Prometheus up as the model for contemporary humanity's revolt against its condition, doing so is mistaken. Camus believed "we are still deaf to the great cry of human revolt of which [Prometheus] gives the solitary signal." This mistake stems from contemporary humanity's failure to recognize that "souls and bodies can be freed at the same time." Camus's point is that modern revolutions have emphasized freeing the body, even if it means "the mind must suffer temporary death."[22]

In the Prometheus essay, Camus begins his exploration of modern ideological movements that rationalize the dehumanization of others in the name of some future utopia. They sacrifice partial justice today for a promised total justice that history will deliver. Camus reminds us "Man is everywhere, and everywhere we find his cries, his suffering, and his threats."[23] "Prometheus in the Underworld" provides us, then, with an early formulation of Camus's idea of

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 136.

[22] Albert Camus, "Prometheus in the Underworld," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 138, 139, 139.

[23] Ibid., 140.

authentic rebellion and its recognition of human dignity. Camus reminds us "that any mutilation of man can only be temporary, and that one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man."[24] To best serve humanity one must realize that total justice is not possible on this Earth; thus, the call for a sense of measuredness.

A third essay in the collection, "Helen's Exile," further expands Camus's notions of authentic rebellion and explicitly introduces the idea of respecting limits. Early in the essay, Camus reminds us that "Greek thought was always based on the idea of limits." Greek thought never carried anything to extremes because "[I]t gave everything its share," denying neither reason nor religion. Camus criticizes Europe for being excessive and seeking to totalize existence in the name of "a future world in which reason will reign supreme."[25] "Helen's Exile" continues Camus's critique of the modern quest to bring about absolute justice.

Camus lauds the wisdom of Socrates, admitting that he did not presume to know what he did not. Camus notes "The most exemplary life and thought of these centuries ends with a proud acknowledgment of ignorance. In forgetting this we have forgotten our virility." In forgetting our ignorance, we lose our humanity. We seek to conquer the world to bring about total justice. "While the Greeks used reason to restrain the will, we have ended by placing the impulse of the will at the heart of reason, and reason has therefore become murderous."[26]

Like "Prometheus in the Underworld," "Helen's Exile" hints at Camus's conception of authentic rebellion. He criticizes the way contemporary humanity has come to "prefer the power that apes greatness."[27] We have begun to view the world as capable of being conquered and

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[24] Ibid., 142.

[25] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 148, 149.

[26] Ibid., 150, 151.

mastered. In doing this, we forget our limits. Camus reminds us that the Greeks never argued that the limit could not be crossed; they knew it existed and believed that the one who crossed it would be "mercilessly struck down." The essay ends with Camus arguing for a return to the Greeks by recognizing there are certain limits to human action that must not be transgressed. We recognize these limits "through the faces of those we love, in short, by means of beauty"[28].

The essays in *Summer* are an important beginning to Camus's recognition that we cannot ignore the tension of human existence. Attempts to rectify the human condition can easily become deadly to oneself and others. One can never truly disengage from the world and humanity. Germaine Brée notes the essay format provided Camus "an instrument of inner clarification and definition, and therefore, of liberation."[29] In *Summer* we see a writer trying to clarify the events surrounding him, defining his understanding of the modern world such that he can now begin to make a systematic argument against metaphysical rebellion in his major work, *The Rebel*.

The Rebel

In some ways, *The Rebel* is a continuation of the exploration of the consequences Camus laid out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In that work, Camus identified the intellectual malady of absurdity and raised the question as to whether or not one should commit suicide. He concludes that killing oneself is not the answer as it does not solve the problem of absurdity, it simply avoids it by removing human life from the absurd equation. An authentic stance against

[27] Ibid., 150.

[28] Ibid., 152, 153.

[29] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 234.

absurdity involves living with full knowledge of human mortality and refusing to hope, thereby committing oneself to finding fulfillment in this world.

The Myth of Sisyphus attempted to resolve the problem of suicide "without the aid of external values."[30] *The Rebel* attempts to resolve the problem of murder in the same manner. Camus begins *The Rebel* with a discussion of the absurd and the paradox that seems to arise in terms of recognition of the absurd's relation to murder. He argues that murder in the face of the absurd appears to be a matter of indifference. "If we believe in nothing, if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance."[31] Without the ability to deduce rules of behavior from the absurd we are just as justified in murdering our neighbor as we are in caring for the sick.

Of course, first impressions can be deceptive, and Camus is quick to point out that absurdist reasoning forbids suicide because it does not resolve the absurd encounter, it simply removes human consciousness from the equation. He reminds us "The final conclusion of absurdist reasoning is, in fact, the repudiation of suicide and the acceptance of the desperate encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe." The repudiation of suicide and acceptance of the encounter implies that "human life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes this encounter possible." The conclusion follows that "From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men."[32]

It is important to remember that Camus took the absurdity of the world as his starting point. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* he counseled revolt as the authentic stance against absurdity

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[30] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), v.

[31] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,.* 5.

[32] Ibid., 6, 6, 6.

because it kept the absurd encounter alive without resigning to despair. His discussion in that collection of essays, however, was limited to the individual experience of and revolt against the absurd. In *The Rebel* Camus explores the notion of revolt in the context of human society. In doing so, he contrasts authentic rebellion[33] with metaphysical rebellion and highlights the danger of conflating the two.

At the beginning of The Rebel, Camus constructs a definition of the "authentic" rebel. For Camus, a rebel is someone who "says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation." He goes on to note that a rebel "says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion." The rebel's simultaneous no/yes establishes the limit of what may be tolerated. For Camus, the rebel's "no" establishes the boundary at which the "yes" to mistreatment ends. He argues: "the movement of rebellion is founded simultaneously on the categorical rejection of an intrusion that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which, in the rebel's mind, is more precisely the impression that he 'has the right to….'" "Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right."[34]

During a rebellion, the rebel feels "revulsion" at injustice and through this experience gains "a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself." Through this refusal of continued mistreatment, the rebel finds a voice and "begins to desire and to judge." Eventually, the rebel finds that saying no to mistreatment was only a beginning. The rebel begins to demand to be treated as an equal. "The part of himself that he wanted to be respected he proceeds to place above everything else and proclaims it preferable to everything, even to life itself."[35] As

[33] Camus never uses the phrase "authentic" to describe his conception of a rebel, but I use the term to help differentiate it from perverted forms of rebellion like "metaphysical rebellion" and "historical rebellion." An authentic rebel is one who says "no" to mistreatment at the hands of others and "yes" to the existence of limits that cannot be crossed in the name of a dignity common not only to the rebel, but all humans.

[34] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 13.

time moves on, rebels want to identify themselves with the good they have discovered and want others to recognize and acknowledge the good they have found within themselves. If the rebel's demands for recognition are ignored, death becomes preferable to domination. "Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees."[36]

Camus argues that even though the "All or Nothing" attitude in the rebel appears to stem from what is most individualistic in humans, it "questions the very idea of the individual." For Camus, the preference for death over mistreatment speaks to the existence of a good that is universal to all humanity. "If he prefers the risk of death to the negation of the rights that he defends, it is because he considers these rights more important than himself." The rebel acts "in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men."[37]

Although common values are still indeterminate, authentic rebels conduct themselves in a way that strives to preserve these values. Camus argues that the authentic rebel "is fighting for the integrity of one part of his being" and does not try to conquer, simply to impose. This rebel refuses to be humiliated and does not ask that others be. For a slave to rebel and then force their master into slavery negates the slave's rebellion because it deprives the former master of the good which implored the slave to rebel in the first place. The authentic rebel acts "in the defense of a dignity common to all men."[38]

While an individual's encounter with the indifference of the world can be frustrating, it eventually becomes clear that "this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human

[35] Ibid., 14, 14, 15.

[36] Ibid., 15.

[37] Ibid., 15, 15-16, 16.

[38] Ibid., 18, 18.

reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe."[39] Brée notes that Camus's notion of rebellion stresses double relativity. My rebellion rises from a demand for respect for my dignity, so I must also be aware that others have the same demand of me. Camus's notion of rebellion "involves the idea of a measure of liberty and a measure of justice; it contains an affirmation of human solidarity which, in its turn, serves as a limit for revolt itself."[40] Camus writes: "In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself – a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist."[41]

Having discussed authentic rebellion and the way it finds its limit within itself, Camus moves to perversions of rebellion which he calls metaphysical and historical. Camus defines metaphysical rebellion as "the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation." Metaphysical rebellion begins with the impulse of "authentic rebellion." That impulse is a dissatisfaction with humanity's maltreatment, as well as the principle of justice found within oneself and in the world. The metaphysical rebel desires to conquer. "The slave begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown."[42] Camus uses the figures of Prometheus and Cain to contrast authentic rebellion and metaphysical rebellion. As noted above, Prometheus's rebellion was limited to a battle against Zeus specifically, not a rebellion against all the gods and creation. Prometheus rebelled to remedy Zeus's specific injustices against humanity, not to contest the very nature of good and evil itself. "The Greeks are never

[39] Ibid., 22.

[40] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 223.

[41] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,* 22.

[42] Ibid., 23, 25.

vindictive. In their most audacious flights they always remain faithful to the idea of moderation, a concept they deified."[43]

Camus mentions Cain as the first example of metaphysical rebellion. He notes: "With Cain, the first act of rebellion coincides with the first crime. The history of rebellion, as we are experiencing it today, has far more to do with the children of Cain than with the disciples of Prometheus."[44] In his commentary on Camus, John Foley argues "Cain is the first nihilist, the first to negate all value, whether social or spiritual, mundane or transcendent." He continues, "Cain's revolt is an attack both on God and the values of human life."[45] Camus puts it as follows: "Human insurrection, in its exalted and tragic forms, is only, and can only be, a prolonged protest against death, a violent accusation against the universal death penalty."[46]

The metaphysical rebel decries the human condition and its creator while affirming "the solitude of man and the nonexistence of any kind of morality." Camus argues that these rebels have concurrently tried to "construct a purely terrestrial kingdom where their chosen principles will hold sway."[47] These revolts in the name of humanity's freedom turn "into a murderous and unjust tyranny exercised against one's fellow men."[48] The metaphysical rebel has taken rebellion too far. In the beginning "the rebel only wanted to conquer his own existence and

[43] Ibid., 27.

[44] Ibid., 32.

[45] John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 59.

[46] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*: *An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 100.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 225.

maintain it in the face of God."[49] Metaphysical rebels take it upon themselves to try and correct creation and maximize human freedom, but history has shown this to be a deadly undertaking.

In *The Rebel* Camus identifies another type of rebellion which he calls historical. Like metaphysical rebellion, historical rebellion is a perversion of authentic rebellion. Historical rebellion is rooted in an appeal to freedom and justice. Camus believes that freedom is the principle that motivates all revolutions. Without freedom, the rebel cannot even begin to conceive of justice. Camus argues that the issue with historical rebellion arises because a time comes "when justice demands the suspension of freedom."[50]

Eventually, this desire for total justice will conflict with freedom. Historical rebellion against social injustice "ends in an unlimited claim to justice which turns into a murderous terrorism directed against individual freedom."[51] Camus highlights the dangers that can stem from the human desire for unity: the concept of rebellion can be perverted to seek a totalized freedom or totalized justice, ignoring the very limits at the heart of authentic rebellion.

Camus's sense of authentic rebellion suggests the existence of a human nature, or at the very least a sense of the inviolable in each human being, a common dignity that should not be debased. "When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical."[52] Camus's fictional output in this stage continues the analysis of rebellion one sees in *The Rebel*. In fictional form we see that Camus portrays individuals struggling against an absurd world wherein some discover the

[49] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 103.

[50] Ibid., 105.

[51] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 225.

[52] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 17.

potential for authentic rebellion by recognizing the common plight of humanity and the potential to remedy injustice through human action.

Confronting the Absurd Together: *The Plague*

The Plague is considered one of the best novels of the post-war period. It quickly sold more than 100,000 copies and was translated into many languages. The novel made Camus a celebrity and it presents a significant development in Camus's consideration of rebellion, authentic and otherwise.

Camus's choice of Oran for the novel's setting was no accident as he wanted to keep the novel grounded in reality by setting it in a real city and as his essay "The Minotaur…" suggests, Oran is a town where people must avoid the desire to become like nothing. Oran is an apt setting because its citizens are not particularly bad people, they are simply concerned with day to day commerce and fostering habits to pass the time when they are not trying to make money. Dr. Rieux, the novel's narrator, notes:

> In this respect our townsfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure; therefore we tell ourselves that pestilence is a mere bogy of the mind, a bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn't always pass away and, from one bad dream to another, it is men who pass away, and the humanists first of all, because they haven't taken their precautions.[53]

The novel focuses on the efforts of several men in Oran who help combat the plague. Among these men are doctors, a priest, a journalist, and a criminal. Through their engagement with the plague, these men not only come to learn about themselves, but they signify what Camus considers to be authentic and inauthentic rebellion. Some of the city's occupants will use the tragedy to their advantage; others will rise to combat the pestilence. A discussion of several of this latter group illuminates Camus's belief that authentic confrontation with the absurd stems

[53] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 37.

not only from a lucid awareness of it, but a recognition that the condition is not unique to one person. It represents the shared condition of humanity. In the symbol of a quarantined town left to heal its own wounds, Camus highlights humanity's metaphysical situation. Sprintzen notes that the plague symbolizes "the unreasonable in nature that constitutes a permanent threat to the realm of the human."[54]

Four characters, Rambert, Tarrou, Father Paneloux, and Dr. Rieux, illustrate forms of revolt that quicken our sense of what that lucidity demands and what it must avoid, in other words, how it remains authentic. Rambert, the journalist, fought in the Spanish civil war and the experience left him jaded with repugnance toward the idea of being a hero willing to die for an idea. He is a character who is "concerned not with understanding but with living."[55] Indeed, Rambert's first priority early in the novel, is to escape the city and reunite with his lover in Paris.

At the end of Part II of the novel, Rambert has a discussion with Tarrou, a businessman, and Dr. Rieux in which they discuss what is worth living and dying for. Rambert says he is interested in "living and dying for what one loves."[56] His experience with war led him to be skeptical of heroic action, and he has decided that he would rather return home to the woman he loves and finish his life out with her than die helping fight a plague in order to be a hero. This conversation juxtaposes two conceptions of what matters most in life, with each conception "entailing differing attitudes toward our involvement with others."[57] Rambert conceives of love as "immediate and personal," while Rieux feels that there may be something beyond immediate personal happiness that makes life fulfilling.

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[54] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 38.

[55] Germaine Brèe, *Camus*, 124.

[56] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 162.

[57] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination,* 93.

Though he disagrees that personal happiness should take priority in life, Rieux acknowledges that Rambert's feelings are "absolutely right and proper." Even though he believes he has a personal duty to fight, Rieux will not hold it against Rambert if he turns his back on fighting the plague in Oran and escapes to Paris. For Rieux it is simply a matter of common decency to continue the fight, not a matter of heroism. Rambert's skepticism about heroism leads him to believe that Rieux and Tarrou both have nothing to lose, no one to love, in continuing to fight against the plague. Tarrou informs Rambert that Rieux is separated from his dying wife, yet continues to fight the plague because it is his duty to his fellow humans. This selflessness inspires Rambert to change his mind about fleeing Oran. He realizes that although he had a woman who loved him waiting for him in Paris, he would be ashamed of himself and "embarrass his relations with the woman he loved" if he were to leave the fight. Rieux tries to reassure Rambert that there is no shame in preferring happiness, but Rambert lets the doctor know that "it may be shameful to be happy by oneself."[58]

Like Rambert, Tarrou is haunted by his past. Readers initially know very little about him until he opens up to Rieux about how he came to be in Oran. Tarrou's father had been a prosecutor and had hoped that his son might join him in becoming an officer of the court. As a young man, he visited a trial wherein his father argued for a man to receive the death penalty. Tarrou saw the terrified look on the defendant's face as they sentenced him to death and realized in that moment that the social order surrounding him was based on the death sentence.

From that day on Tarrou committed himself to becoming an "agitator" who would fight against the established order. In doing so, he would be "fighting against murder."[59] Tarrou

[58] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 163, 209

[59] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 250.

joined forces with a group of rebels who fought against injustice, and admitted that they "too, on occasion, passed sentences for death" but those "few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a new world in which murder would cease to be."[60] Eventually, Tarrou came to realize that his participation in this movement and the killings was equivalent to what his father had been doing. They were each, in their own fashion, condemning a human being to die. Sick of participating in such events, Tarrou dedicated his life to seeking to become a saint without God.

It was this quest for sainthood that led Tarrou to Oran and it is what led him to join Rieux in fighting the plague. Dr. Rieux asks Tarrou if he has an idea for a path to finding peace. Tarrou says that the path to follow towards peace is "The path of sympathy."[61]

At first hesitant to take action, Tarrou, like Rambert, ends up helping fight the plague. Rambert was skeptical of heroism while Tarrou had become skeptical of human action for fear of causing suffering. Seeking perfection in his actions, becoming the saint without God, renders Tarrou, at first, unable to act. Ultimately, he will form community squads to fight the plague and its devastation. Brée notes that "Unlike Rieux, Tarrou cannot come to terms with the reality of man's metaphysical condition nor accept man's participation in its cruel rites."[62] Camus's portrayal of Tarrou's quest to purge himself of all evil strongly suggests the inauthenticity of such a position, however admirable. Better to have a lucid sense of the possible than to be immobilized by the impossible. The limits of rebellion require that sort of lucidity.

Dr. Rieux finds Tarrou's search for sainthood admirable, yet misguided, perhaps tragic. The two become fast friends and share one of the most poignant moments in the novel, sharing

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., 254.

[62] Germaine Brèe, *Camus*, 123.

their love for life and the world as they take a brief and salvific swim in the Mediterranean. The same cannot be said of Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux.

Father Paneloux sees suffering as having a purpose; Dr. Rieux cannot find any justification for it. Their debates with one another are reminiscent of the conversation between Ivan and Aloysha Karamazov, over the suffering of the Hebrew children on the occasion of the birth of Jesus. Indeed, Father Paneloux gives two major sermons in the novel and each of them deals with the question of theodicy, how does God allow suffering in the world.

Father Paneloux's first sermon argues that the plague is God's punishment for the sins of the Oranians. They, the Oranians, had given up an active relationship with God for things of the world, and God finally lost his patience with them. He tells his congregation: "And thus, my brothers, at last it is revealed to you, the divine compassion which has ordained good and evil in everything; wrath and pity, the plague and your salvation. This same pestilence which is slaying you works for your good and points your path."[63] Paneloux is convinced that God is using suffering to warn and instruct.

Father Paneloux's second sermon is far more somber; it comes after he and other plague fighters have hopelessly witnessed the agonizing death of a young boy. Yet, he continues to view suffering as part of God's plan, while Rieux cannot bring himself to "blindly" accept an order where innocent children suffer and die for no reason. Indeed, Father Paneloux has become less and less certain of his position as the two debate the plague and its consequences for human action and meaning.

Paneloux concludes that one "must believe everything or deny everything."[64] He is not so certain or assured that the suffering experienced during the plague will be for some greater

[63] Albert Camus, *The Plague*, 98.

good, but he is convinced that it is all part of God's plan. He tells the congregation: "the love of God is a hard love. It demands total self-surrender, disdain of our human personality. And yet it alone can reconcile us to suffering and the deaths of children, it alone can justify them, since we cannot understand them, and we can only make God's will ours."[65] It should be noted that Paneloux does not argue for total resignation, he still implores the congregation to fight the plague as best they can, but he asks them to view the suffering as a way for God to test and improve their faith, not something evil.

Camus's choice of a physician as his major character and, perhaps, best representative of authentic rebellion, is significant. As mentioned above, Dr. Rieux is the narrator, and sometimes commentator, of the novel. The occupation itself represents the notion of rebellion nicely; a physician who treats the sick, with full knowledge that he cannot truly defy death. In similar fashion, Camus characterizes authentic rebellion as a struggle against the injustice of the world with no illusions about ridding the world of those injustices. Rieux continues his lengthy task of healing without the luxury of abstractions or thoughts about the meaning of the world or the purpose of suffering. In one of the many conversations he has with his new friend and compatriot, Tarrou, Rieux notes: "[S]ince the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?"[66]

Tarrou and Paneloux are both seeking answers, perhaps metaphysical and/or religious answers, to the problems of human suffering. Tarrou lives by the moral code of

[64] Ibid, 224.

[65] Ibid., 228.

[66] Ibid., 128.

"comprehension,"[67] while Paneloux lives by the code of Christianity. Rieux takes a more practical, perhaps measured, approach to the world. He believes "a man can't cure and know at the same time. So let's cure as quickly as we can."[68] Thus, he eschews any preoccupation with idealist or other worldly fantasies of perfection. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus discussed the need for lucidity in the face of the absurd. To be lucid meant to be aware of the world's absurdity. Rieux's view of the world represents a lucid awareness of the human condition and the suffering that accompanies it, coupled with the desire to revolt against suffering and death by working to alleviate that suffering and delaying death. Lucid awareness of humanity's condition requires a type of clear-sightedness to guide one's actions. Meursault, Caligula, and Martha all lacked clear-sightedness. Rieux argues that "The soul of the murderer is blind; and there can be no true goodness nor true love without the utmost clear-sightedness."[69]

One criticism leveled against *The Plague* is Camus's use of a natural phenomenon to represent not only human suffering but human evil. Cruickshank notes that in the novel Camus "avoids facing the problem of the evil that results from human actions."[70] While this criticism may have some validity, Bronner argues that it might be best to consider *The Plague* as Brée does, as a cautionary tale, that warns us that we are all susceptible to spreading the sickness of human suffering and infecting those around us.[71] In this sense, *The Plague* does inform political action. As we have seen in each of the works discussed, it is in forgetting the importance of limits or measuredness in human action that we can cause undue suffering in the world. *The*

[67] Ibid., 130.

[68] Ibid., 210.

[69] Ibid., 131.

[70] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 176.

[71] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 69.

Plague is important for highlighting the communal nature of the revolt against death, an idea that cannot help but inform political thinking. The novel highlights the shared metaphysical condition of humanity and the need to work collectively to ease the suffering found in it. Camus turns his attention, however, to a more direct form of his argument and places it into a political context in his plays of this period, *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins.*

State of Siege

With S*tate of Siege* Camus addresses criticisms of *The Plague* by bringing the political aspects of revolt into focus. Camus collaborated with French theater actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault to produce *State of Siege.* Both men were drawn to the idea of "plague as purgation" and "by the philosophical implications of trial by evil generally." Barrault had initially tried to write a play based on Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, a work Camus had himself used as one of his principal sources. After reading *The Plague,* however, Barrault was happy to partner with Camus to create a play about plague.[72] Although both *The Plague* and *State of Siege* are based around plagues, Camus wanted it to be clear that the play was "in no sense an adaptation" of his novel.[73] Although there are some similarities between the two, a look at the plot of *State of Siege* helps illuminate the differences.

State of Siege tells the story of the Spanish city Cadiz as it is overtaken by a dictator named The Plague. The story of Cadiz's citizens unfolds through a prologue and three acts. The prologue provides a glimpse of life in the city before the regime change. The city is full of citizens who go about their daily lives without much reflection on the general meaning of their

[72] Edward Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen, 1971), 85, 85.

[73] Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 263.

day-to-day existence. One day, as citizens are shopping in the city's market, a comet streaks across the sky, prompting varied reactions among the citizenry.

Most citizens worry that the comet is an omen of bad things to come. One officer of the city's government tells citizens not to worry about the comet and carry on as usual. Nada, a nihilist and drunkard, warns that the town is "in for it" and will "be in it, up to the neck." Nada's pessimistic view is opposed by a young doctor named, Diego. Diego tries to reassure his fellow citizens that all will be fine and encourages them to "Keep stout hearts and all will be well."[74] A government herald tells citizens to deny that they ever saw a comet over Cadiz.

Act one of the play opens on the marketplace where life appears to have returned to normal. The Governor of Cadiz makes an appearance to praise the citizens for their return to the status quo. His belief is that good governments are governments under which nothing happens, so "Nothing new is good."[75] The citizens are quite willing, indeed eager, to return to their routines after the government encouraged them to ignore what their eyes had seen.

Unfortunately for the citizens of Cadiz, that normalcy is short-lived; a man soon drops dead from plague. The arrival of plague to Cadiz sparks varying reactions among citizens and city officials. Each reaction represents a different outlook on the cause of suffering in human life. An old priest takes the plague's arrival as divine punishment, noting an "ancient doom" had fallen on the city and brought about "the hour of reckoning." An astrologer views the plague as being fated by the planets aligning in a manner that "forebodes famine, drought, and pestilence for all and sundry."[76]

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[74] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 140, 139.

[75] Ibid., 150.

[76] Ibid., 153.

Safe in his palace, The Governor hatches a plan to keep citizens in the dark about the plague. He is more annoyed by having to postpone his hunting trip than seeing his citizens die in the streets. At the church, the priest implores citizens to confess their transgressions and seek God's forgiveness, something many of them do. The town's judge, a man named Casado, reads the Bible surrounded by his family. Although his wife suggests the family go out to help their fellow citizens, the judge keeps his family at home to ensure their safety.

Eventually, The Governor decides that the best course of action is to shut down the city until a fresh sea wind carries the pestilence away. Unfortunately for the citizens of Cadiz, the next thing to sweep in is not a fresh wind but a uniformed man and woman who ask to take over the governor's post. This uniformed man is The Plague, and his female companion is Death. In short order, the city's political officials yield to The Plague and Death, fostering the advent of a new cruel order.

Cadiz's new rulers create an administration that encourages citizens to be skeptical of their neighbors, turning anyone showing signs of the plague over to the authorities. Citizens comply with the new administration's decrees because Death possesses a notebook containing everyone's name and she merely needs to cross out someone's name to kill them. Life under The Plague is a bureaucratic nightmare. The new dictator closes off the town and establishes censorship, curfews, and rationing, along with the dictate that citizens turn in those who are infected.

The second act of the play portrays life under the new regime and highlights how the new regime has created an atmosphere of discouragement and despair. Everything requires a permit, and one cannot get a permit without being able to prove the importance of their own existence. In this part of the play, Diego emerges as a character who rebels against the new regime. He

refuses to wear a plague badge because he is not sick. The Plague's secretary tells Diego that the administration starts from the assumption that everyone is guilty, with the goal being that everyone will eventually learn to feel that they are guilty.

Diego finds the new living conditions deplorable and implores his fellow citizens to rise against the new administration. A chorus of citizens admits that they "toe the line, for no one can do anything for his neighbor." Diego refuses to give in to the administration and asserts the innocence of the citizens of Cadiz. The young doctor is eventually run out of town by The Plague and his forces. Diego seeks safe harbor with Judge Casado and his family since the judge's daughter Victoria is Diego's fiancée. The judge refuses to help Diego, arguing that as an official of the law, he must keep it simply "because it is the law." Diego presses him on this issue by asking the judge what happens if crime becomes the law. The judge replies by telling Diego, "If crime becomes the law, it ceases being crime."[77] In this moment, Camus has captured one of the essential ingredients of totalitarianism, namely its contention that all of its actions are legal, that morality is whatever the state commands.

Diego, feeling the stress from singlehandedly rebelling against the new regime and bearing plague marks newly given to him by the regime, acts rashly and responds to the judge's actions by grabbing the judge's son, threatening to infect the boy if the judge contacts the authorities. Eventually, Diego comes to his senses and realizes that he cannot hurt the innocent boy to save his own life. After releasing the boy from his grip, Diego and Victoria flee together. While the two young lovers share a moment of intimacy, The Plague's secretary, Death, confronts them and asks what they are doing. It is during this meeting that Death admits that she

[77] Ibid., 187, 189.

admires Diego's rebellious spirit and lets him in on the secret that death and the repressive regime can be slowed by men who conquer their fear and stand up to death and oppression.

In the third act of the play, Diego returns to Cadiz to organize a rebellion against The Plague and his regime. Diego shares his new knowledge with those helping him and reminds them "Now stop being frightened; that's the one condition of deliverance."[78] The Plague and Death realize that Diego's rebellion is inspiring others, so they offer to allow the citizens to control Death's notebook. The people of Cadiz give in to this and begin striking their enemies from the list of the living. Diego is able to wrest the notebook from the agitated crowd and destroy it, leading to a battle between Diego's forces and those of The Plague.

Diego's forces gain the upper hand in the battle, but The Plague has taken hostages as leverage to stop the rebellion. One of the hostages is Victoria. The Plague brings a dying Victoria to Diego on a stretcher. The Plague offers to spare Victoria's life and allow the two lovers to leave the city in exchange for Diego yielding and allowing The Plague to continue ruling Cadiz. Instead of accepting The Plague's offer, Diego offers his life in exchange for Victoria's, allowing the city to be freed and his love's life to be spared. The Plague agrees to this only because the rules do not allow him to refuse one life in exchange for another. The play ends with Diego dying to liberate his city and save the love of his life. The Plague and Death move on to another city, but The Plague warns the people that the return of their complacent officials and their complacent lifestyle make his return likely.

As he had done in *The Plague*, Camus chose to set *State of Siege* in a real city, even if the events were not real. Camus was criticized by Gabriel Marcel for setting his play about totalitarianism in Spain. Marcel felt it would have been more appropriate for the play to have

[78] Ibid., 209.

been set in some Eastern European country. In an article entitled "Why Spain?" Camus responded to Marcel's criticism of the play's setting by indicating that it was his aim: "to attack a kind of political society that set itself up […] on a totalitarian model, both on the Right and on the Left." To fail to criticize a totalitarian regime in Western Europe because it wasn't communist made no sense to Camus. His purpose with the work was to "[defend] the individual, the flesh in its noblest aspects – in short, human love – against the abstractions and terrors of the totalitarian state, whether Russian, German, or Spanish."[79]

In the same article, Camus also criticizes the French government for turning Spaniards sympathetic to the Spanish Republic over to Franco's totalitarian regime. Camus notes that he cannot recall the French government delivering anti-Communists to the Russian government, a hypocrisy that repulsed him. The French government turned a blind eye to the hypocrisy and betrayal of the Spanish Republic because they believed Russian communism to be a more dangerous enemy, even though Franco's regime was also deadly.

Camus's choice of Spain captures his belief in the solidarity brought about by common human suffering. He tells Marcel: "The world I live in is loathsome to me, but I feel one with the men who suffer in it." Camus ends the article by telling Marcel that he will not allow Marcel to question his choice of setting "so long as the murder of a man angers you only when that man shares your ideas."[80] Camus criticized and condemned state violence in all forms, regardless of political orientation, a stance he makes clear in *The Rebel*.

State of Siege is an important work in Camus's career because it expands the notion of collective revolt against the absurd from personal relations towards the relationship between

[79] Albert Camus, "Why Spain?," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 78, 78.

[80] Ibid., 83, 83.

society and the state. While the characters in *The Plague* wage a collective revolt against illness and human suffering, they rarely interact with the government of Oran. As I discussed above, *The Plague* is more successful at introducing the idea of collective revolt against humanity's metaphysical position than it is a discussion of collective revolt against a political situation that exploits the absurd to justify totalitarianism.

Brée points out that like *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*, *State of Siege* "is a play with death." The difference is "This time, however, death alone does not hold sway, for [*State of Siege*] also concerns love and life."[81] Caligula was guilty of loving only himself. He became so obsessed with remaking the world in his image that he turned away from any type of love he could have received, whether it be a romantic love with Caesonia or the love of friends with Scipio. In *The Misunderstanding*, Martha loves her mother but she refuses to love her brother when he returns to save his mother and sister. Both Martha and Caligula are guilty of being so selfish that they cannot recognize the common suffering of humanity. Diego loves Victoria, but by the end of *State of Siege,* he has been awakened to humanity's common struggle against the absurd and refuses to allow The Plague to continue his despotic rule over Cadiz.

State of Siege is significant, as well, because it represents a move "from a metaphysical to a social plane."[82] In *The Plague*, Camus highlights humanity's metaphysical position and human revolt against it. In *State of Siege*, a character, The Plague, represents social disorder that results from a lack of awareness of oppression and nihilism. Standing beside The Plague as his faithful assistant is Death. With this relationship, Camus is highlighting the intimate nature between totalitarian regimes and death. *State of Siege* focuses on how totalitarian governments represent

[81] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 153.

[82] Ibid., 175.

entities that repress humanity and how their indignities towards their citizens may stir revulsion and eventually revolt in their subjects.

Finally, the play highlights how totalitarian regimes work to humiliate and isolate individuals from society at large. To secure his rule The Plague imposes five new rules upon Cadiz when he first takes power. The first edict is "All infected houses are to be marked on their front doors with the plague sign – a black star with rays a foot long, and headed by this inscription: 'We are all brothers.'"[83] This edict has the effect of identifying infection and isolating it. As Sprintzen notes: "The destruction of person-to-person relations is begun under the slogan of brotherhood."[84] The second edict imposes rationing, with food being "doled out in equal and exiguous shares to all who can prove their adhesion to the new social order." This edict is designed to force complicity with the regime, regardless of how repulsive it may be. To deny the regime loyalty could be to deny oneself survival. The third edict calls for a curfew in town and forbids anyone to be in public past curfew without proper approval from the authorities. This limits social interactions among citizens and deprives them of the liberty of leaving their homes whenever they please.

The fourth edict forbids "[providing] help to any person stricken with the disease, except by reporting the case to the authorities, who then will take the necessary steps." Reporting others who are stricken with the disease rewards the revealing party with a double ration. This turns the citizenry against one another. The fifth edict asks that citizens keep a pad soaked in vinegar in their mouth because it is necessary "to avoid contagion through the air you breathe" because "words are carriers of infection."[85] The fourth and fifth edicts isolate individuals from one

[83] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 165-166.

[84] David Sprintzen, *Camus: A Critical Examination*, 109.

another and help to prevent social cohesion from occurring. As Hannah Arendt has observed and Camus dramatically portrays, isolation is a major tool of totalitarian regimes. It destroys the public life of the political. As Arendt poignantly observes: "Solitude can become loneliness; this happens when all by myself I am deserted by my own self."[86]

The Plague arrives and justifies his repressive regime in the name of ridding Cadiz's citizens of "imbecilities" such as sentiment and happiness. The Plague promises the city organization and argues that "good organization is better than cheap emotion." The Plague closes the first part of the play by proclaiming "I bring you order, silence, and total justice."[87] This statement represents the totalizing claim of metaphysical rebellion. Metaphysical rebels believe that they can remake creation in their desired image, failing to recognize the existence of limits that should not be crossed.

Diego, however, has moments in the play where he is tempted to go beyond the reasonable limit to try and obtain the results he wants. Diego becomes infected with the plague when he decides to challenge the regime, but he runs away from the authorities before they can capture him. Diego flees to the judge's house, but the judge refuses to help this "criminal." To assure his escape Diego grabs the judge's young son and threatens to infect him with the plague. As discussed above, the judge feels convinced in turning Diego into the new administration because he is an officer of the law and the law says the plague-infected must be turned over to the authorities. The judge believes the law is the law, even if crime has become law, it is no

[85] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays,* 166, 167, 169.

[86] Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *The Review of Politics*15, no. 3 (1953), 325.

[87] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 171, 173

longer crime because it is the law. Diego responds to the judge by noting that in a situation where crime has become the law, "then it's virtue you must punish!"[88]

Diego's grabbing the child to escape capture raises the moral dilemma of whether he still has virtue on his side. The judge's wife begs Diego to reconsider and implores him not to "behave like one whose heart has turned to stone!" The judge's wife notes that some things are bigger than decrees of the law, noting: "I spit on your law! I have on my side the right of lovers not to be parted, the right of the criminal to be forgiven, the right of every penitent to recover his good name."[89] In her statement, we hear one of Camus's major stances: that human laws are based on human reason, a faculty that while helpful, is not infallible. This stance is implicit in his opposition to the death penalty. Camus was unconvinced that men had the right to condemn one another to death.

In the end, Diego lets the young man go because he realizes infecting the innocent boy will make him no better than the regime he is fighting. Diego is ashamed of his actions and what he has become. He has let his desire for freedom for his city cloud his judgment to the point that he almost infected an innocent young man with the plague. Ashamed of his actions, Diego flees the city to decide how to properly act. "I'd like to run away from all this. I've lost my bearings and I no longer know where my duty lies."[90]

Opposed to Diego is the drunken nihilist of Cadiz, Nada. As a nihilist, Nada enjoys seeing the world thrown into chaos since it shatters the illusion of control and order his fellow citizens had readily accepted. With his name literally translating to "nothing," it is no surprise

[88] Ibid., 190.

[89] Ibid., 191, 192.

[90] Ibid., 195.

that Nada is more than happy to serve The Plague's new administration as a government official. Nada is aware of the absurd and has used that revelation to justify living as though nothing has any value. Nada proudly proclaims: "[L]et's annihilate everything, I say. That's my philosophy. God denies the world, and I deny God. Long live nothing, for it's the only thing that exists."[91] In Nada we see someone who has taken humanity's absurd metaphysical condition to mean that an indifferent universe and lack of apparent meaning to the world signifies that life itself is meaningless. Brée notes that "Indifference and abstraction make of our human values empty concepts and shameless parodies, delivering us up as captives of the absurd."[92]

While Brée's statement perfectly captures the way Nada's nihilism allows him to dismiss human values, the statement also applies to Cadiz's civil and religious authorities. The play opens with the government coming forth to ask citizens to deny what they have seen with their own eyes. The governor of Cadiz is content with fostering habits among his citizenry, noting "I am glad to see that nothing's changed, for that is as it should be. I like my habits, and change is the one thing I detest." The theme of the governor's administration is "Good governments are governments under which nothing happens."[93] Though this statement may be true if a government is active and honest, in *State of Siege* it represents a government that is so content with business as usual that it is easily overtaken by an outside order that can impose totalitarian rule.

Camus's treatment of Father Paneloux in *The Plague* was fairly sympathetic. He conveyed a priest who may have misinterpreted the meaning of the plague, but one who decided

[91] Ibid., 179.

[92] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 176.

[93] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 151, 141.

to act to fight it all the same. Paneloux helped those voluntarily fighting the plague through recognition of his Christian duty. In *State of Siege*, Camus is less forgiving of the clergy. The priest in the play speaks very little, but his first words have him criticizing the city for being sinful. In his second speech, the priest asks everyone to come forth and confess their sin to their neighbors. The priest does confess "I accuse myself, for my part, of having often lacked in charity."[94] Although we hope this revelation represents a turning point for the priest, by the end of the first act of the play he can be seen walking away from one of the members of his flock, hurrying away after the dying man cries for his assistance.

The citizens of Cadiz are portrayed as being fairly content and unreflective. This attitude, combined with the guidance of a government that refused to recognize danger and a priest who failed to follow the path he preached, shows how the citizens of Cadiz were easily delivered into the hands of The Plague.

In the end, it is up to a private citizen, Diego, to help save the city. Diego calls forth Camus's notion of revolt with the statement "My life is nothing. What count for me are my reasons for living." Diego ultimately agrees to sacrifice himself to save Victoria and the city of Cadiz. He refuses to put his happiness over the happiness of his fellow citizens: "This girl's love is my private property and I can deal with it as I choose. But those men's freedom belongs to them; I have no rights over it." Diego learns to refuse death its power and also refuses to become a partner of death. He criticizes the historical belief that "To do away with murder we must kill, and to prevent injustice we must do violence."[95] These notions represent a perversion of the idea of true rebellion and can lead to metaphysical rebellion.

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[94] Ibid., 155.

[95] Ibid., 220, 221, 221.

State of Siege ends with the chorus reminding the audience "there is no justice – but there are limits. And those who stand for no rules at all, no less than those who want to impose a rule for everything, overstep the limit."[96] Diego is a character who steps toward the line of metaphysical rebellion but has enough moral sensitivity to step back from it. He could not live with himself if he murdered an innocent child to save his own life. *State of Siege* explores the notion of limits and Camus's next play, *The Just Assassins*, more fully explores where those limits lie.

The Just Assassins

Camus's final original play, *The Just Assassins*, is considered one of his best. The play is based on historical events and asks whether there are limits to human revolt against injustice, as well as what those limits might be. While *State of Siege* presented a straightforward situation in which humanity was right to fight against its oppressors, *The Just Assassins* asks whether the death of innocents can be justified in exchange for some potential future good.

Camus based the play on the work of Russian terrorist Boris Savinkov. Savinkov's book *Souvenirs d'un terroriste* chronicles his work organizing the combat with the socialist party at the start of the 20th century.[97] Edward Freeman notes that overall the play is "in the essentials of its plot historical and specific." The play centers around the assassination of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovitch, the uncle of Tsar Nicholas II. It focuses on a terrorist named Ivan Kaliayev, which is the real name of the man who threw the bomb that killed the Grand Duke.[98]

The Just Assassins is set in Russia and centers on a group of assassins who are planning to kill the Grand Duke. The plans have been meticulously laid out, and a killer has been chosen,

[96] Ibid., 231.

[97] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 159.

[98] Edward Freeman. *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study*, 100, 100.

a young man named Kaliayev. An older man, Stepan has just returned from prison and objects to Kaliayev being chosen to throw the bomb instead of himself. Stepan has doubts that Kaliayev has the fortitude to carry out the deed. Stepan's objection is overruled. The plan is to throw a bomb under the Grand Duke's carriage as he heads toward the theater. The night the plan is set in motion, each of the terrorists assumes their place and waits to hear the explosion. No one hears the bomb go off, so the assassins all regroup at their hideout. Kaliayev refused to throw the bomb and assassinate the Grand Duke because he saw that the Grand Duke was not traveling alone; his young niece and nephew were in the carriage with him.

The assassins discuss whether they are willing to shed innocent blood to achieve their goals. The argument centers on whether their cause can still claim to be just if they murder innocent children. Stepan takes a hardline attitude and argues that the Grand Duke has inflicted so much suffering that he must be killed at all costs. Stepan believes that the terrorists will not have many chances to carry out the assassination, so they must take advantage of any opportunity, even if innocents are killed in the process. Kaliayev and Dora argue that the revolutionaries will lose support for their cause once it is revealed that they will go to any lengths to bring about change. Eventually, all of the group members except for Stepan agree that the group will wait for another opportunity to kill the Grand Duke when he is alone. They cannot allow the killing of innocent children to taint their cause.

A few days later they get their chance. This time Kaliayev successfully kills the Grand Duke by blowing up his carriage. Kaliayev is arrested and put in a cell. While he is in his cell Kaliayev is offered a chance to confess that he is a murderer and go free. He argues that confessing and going free is what would make him a murderer. Allowing himself to be put to death for killing someone in the name of his cause would keep him from being a simple

murderer. The Grand Duchess comes to Kaliayev's cell and tries to explain to him that though he felt he was killing a tyrant he was killing her husband, who was just a man to her and his niece and nephew. Kaliayev is offered a pardon several times, but he refuses to give up the names of his co-conspirators and is eventually put to death.

In *The Just Assassins* Camus presents the question of whether revolt against repression has limits. The key question raised by the play is if murder can ever be justified. Camus explores this question in much greater detail in *The Rebel*, but with his final original play, he asks if murdering innocents can be used to justify the liberation of a greater number of oppressed people. Throughout the play, the limits of revolt are explored in a series of encounters between different characters.

The first encounter comes towards the beginning of the play and is between Kaliayev, the young poet chosen by the resistance group to throw the bomb, and Stepan, the recently returned exile. The clash between these two men foreshadows Camus's lengthy discussion of genuine revolt found in *The Rebel*. Kaliayev joined the revolution because he loves life. Stepan, a hard-liner, joined the revolution because he believes in absolute justice. Stepan believes that one can never be truly free if one single person is in bondage. Stepan tells Kaliyev: "I do not love life; I love something higher – and that is justice."[99]

Stepan's commitment to justice is total. He is consumed by it and believes that the organization must achieve its goals at any cost. "We haven't joined together to admire each other. We have joined together *to get something done*."[100] Kaliayev takes the organization and its goals seriously, but his conviction is that life is beautiful and contains some joys worth

[99] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 244.

[100] Ibid., 243.

fighting for. Kayliayev believes in "revolution for the sake of life-to give life a chance […]."[101] In these two men, we see two justifications for revolution: justice and love of life. Though both justifications have their merits, Camus's stance is that pursuing justice for justice's own sake is dangerous, especially if it disregards the significance of human life.

The second encounter framing the discussion of limits comes after Kaliayev fails to throw the bomb because he saw the faces of the Grand Duke's niece and nephew. This encounter involves all of the terrorists discussing whether or not their cause is worth sacrificing innocent lives. Stepan criticizes Kaliayev's failure to act, noting that the work to be done and the progress to be made was justified, even if it meant the death of two innocent children. As a hardliner, Stepan fully believes "Nothing that can serve our cause should be ruled out." Stepan is so committed to the idea of justice that he will pursue his conception of it, even if he has to kill those he is claiming to liberate.[102]

Stepan is alone in this stance. Each of the other terrorists recognizes that they cannot justify endless killings to pursue their goals. To do so would not only betray their movement, it would dishonor the thousands of "brothers" who "died to make it known that everything is *not* allowed." Dora and Annenkov, the group's leader, side with Kaliayev in agreeing that the group should not kill the innocent. Dora tells Stepan: "Even in destruction there's a right way and a wrong way – and there are limits."[103] In some ways, Stepan is guilty of indulging in false hopes by believing that the revolutionaries can bring total justice to Earth. He has become so obsessed with justice that he is willing to murder as many people, innocent or not, as necessary to bring

[101] Ibid., 245.

[102] Ibid., 257, 257.

[103] Ibid., 257, 258.

about his goal. Stepan is overruled and the group decides to carry out the bombing another night when the Grand Duke is not with his niece and nephew.

In the third act, Dora and Kaliayev share a key encounter that continues this exploration of the limits of revolt. This encounter occurs just before Kaliayev successfully kills the Grand Duke and highlights the power of personal love in determining action. The discussion between Dora and Kaliayev recalls a question Camus raises in his notebooks: "Can one love a country like a woman?"[104] In *The Plague*, Rambert decides to stay behind to help fight the plague, taking the risk that he may die fighting the disease before being reunited with his lover. In *State of Siege*, Diego sacrifices himself to save Victoria and Cadiz. With Kaliayev, Camus provides us with another character who realized that dying for a cause that saves the lives of others can come not only at the cost of one's own life but the sacrifice of happiness in the form of personal love. Dora captures the plight of the two lovers when she says: "I love you with the same love as yours: a love that's half frozen, because it's rooted in justice and reared in prison cells."[105] The answer to Camus's question appears to be that one may not learn to love a country until one has experienced the love of a woman. Without the experience of love and the happiness it brings, one may lack the conviction to revolt in the name of life.

The final two encounters occur after Kaliayev has killed the Grand Duke and has been arrested for his crime. These moments showcase Kaliayev facing the consequences of his action. The first meeting takes place between Kaliyev and the police chief, Skuratov. Skuratov represents justice of the state. He offers to let Kaliayev live if he agrees to give up his comrades. The police chief offers Kaliayev a chance at freedom but makes it clear that the state is in control

[104] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951,* trans. Justin O'Brien (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 54.

[105] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 271.

after Kaliayev gives him a sarcastic response to his offer. Skuratov says: "One doesn't ask for life, my friend. One's given it. Have *you* never let anybody off?" Skuratov goes on to tell Kaliayev: "Appearances notwithstanding, I am not your enemy. I won't even say your ideas are wrong. Except when they lead to murder."[106] In the end, Kaliayev refuses the state's pardon, agreeing instead to keep his commitment to pay for the life he took by giving his own and refusing to betray his comrades.

The final encounter brings Kaliayev face to face with the Grand Duchess. She appeals to Kaliayev on a human level, while imploring him to consider the consequences his actions have on his eternal salvation. The Grand Duchess lays out the case to Kaliayev, using her dead husband's words to provide irony to the claims of the revolutionaries:

> The same voice! You have exactly the same voice as his. But, I suppose, all men use the same tone when they speak of justice. He used to say "That is just," and nobody had a right to question it. And yet perhaps he was mistaken; perhaps you, too, are mistaken.[107]

The Grand Duchess adds that she had to see her husband dead and witness his blood all over her. Kaliayev tells her to be silent, but she refuses. He needs to hear the truth about the human toll his actions required.

The Grand Duchess poses questions to Kaliayev on whether or not he did a good thing and asks Kaliayev to pray with her, noting that even though the murder of her husband was between the two humans, perhaps God could bring them together. Kaliayev refuses the offer, noting:

> I have given up counting on the agreement that I once made with God. But in dying, I shall keep the agreement I made with those I love, my brothers, who are thinking of me at this moment. And it would be betraying them to pray.[108]

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[106] Ibid., 181, 181.

[107] Ibid., 286.

[108] Ibid., 289.

Kaliayev's encounter with the Grand Duchess recalls Camus's stance on the death penalty and why taking a life should never be done lightly, if at all. Kaliayev and his comrades were sure that the Grand Duke had oppressed the people, but his wife noted that he too, had spoken of justice. The pursuit of justice in a world where none is given is dangerous because, without consideration of limits on violence and revolution, the risk is there to seek a totalizing justice. In *The Just Assassins* Camus explores an idea he will explore more explicitly in *The Rebel*: the notion that murder can never be truly justified but if one must commit murder, they must pay for it with their own life. Exchanging your life for the life of another shows "the equal value of human lives."[109]

Indeed, Camus dedicates an entire section of *The Rebel*, "The Fastidious Assassins," to Kaliayev and his comrades. In that section, he raises the moral question of murder in a political context, namely with respect to the notion of justice. "Necessary and inexcusable – that is how murder appeared to them." Camus goes on to note the following: "Mediocre minds, confronted with this terrible problem, can take refuge by ignoring one of the terms of the dilemma."[110] Although the Grand Duchess is right to ask Kaliayev if he had truly considered his actions, Camus believes that the assassin had done so and determined that the chance of ending the Grand Duke's oppression was worth killing him and dying for the act. Stepan views murder as necessary, finding it practical and never worrying if it is inexcusable or not.

Brée argues that the play, like *The Stranger*, has a second half that shifts the spotlight from the individual's view of life towards "the existing forms of justice."[111] Before he meets

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[109] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 169.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 186.

with Skuratov, Kaliayev speaks with a fellow prisoner, Foka. Kaliayev reaches out to the stranger by asking: "What's your name, brother?"[112] Foka responds with his name and Kaliayev asks what he is in prison for. Foka has been imprisoned for drunkenly killing three people. He eventually lets Kaliayev know that he is not only a prisoner, but he is also the hangman. The convicted man has agreed to carry out executions in exchange for years off his sentence. Just before the two part ways, Foka and Kaliayev have an interesting exchange that puts into light the question of when, if ever, killing is justified:

> **Kaliayev:** So you're an executioner?
> **Foka:** And you, sir – what about you?

The exchange between Kaliayev and Foka is interesting because Kaliayev's first instinct is to believe that Foka only killed because he was hungry. Foka did not kill because he was hungry, but because he was drunk. He is shocked that a young nobleman like Kaliayev would end up in prison for murder, "The world is made for bright young noblemen like you." Kaliayev, a poet to the end, retorts that "It is made for *you*, my friend. There are too many crimes, there's too much poverty in the world today." Foka recognizes that even though that might be the case, one should be mindful that there should be limits to actions: "That's as it may be. One thing's sure: whether one's free or not, it doesn't pay to take a drop too much."[113]

The play ends, perhaps appropriately, with a description of Kaliayev's execution. Stepan relates to Dora that Kaliayev not only refused to turn on his associates, but he also died with his head held high. Kaliayev's last words were: "I have already told you that I am through with life, and have squared up accounts with death."[114] Kaliayev was willing to sacrifice his happiness

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[112] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 276.

[113] Ibid., 278, 278, 278.

[114] Ibid., 300.

and life to try and improve the lives of his fellow citizens. He knew he was wrong to take a life, but he was willing to give his life in exchange.

In *The Rebel* Camus argues that Kaliayev's sacrifice of his own life in exchange for atoning for the murder of the Grand Duke is important; it recognizes that human life has a value and taking one should have a cost. "A life is paid for by another life, and from these two sacrifices springs the promise of a value." He continues: "Confronted with the possibility that the idea may be realized in the future, human life can be everything or nothing."[115] *The Just Assassins* shows that one cannot blindly seek total justice in the world. Actions have consequences and to take action that ends lives, one should be willing to pay with their own life. The revolutionaries in the play fight for human dignity and are willing to sacrifice themselves to assure it for others. The question among the group is not whether one should sacrifice themselves for justice, but how far one can go to pursue justice. Stepan fails to recognize that being indiscriminate in pursuit of justice undermines the spirit of authentic rebellion. Authentic rebellion recognizes that even though everyone has a right to dignity and respect, that rebellion must respect that dignity of others. Failure to do so delegitimizes the moral claim of authenticity.

[115] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 169, 170.

Chapter 4. Judgment

The Myth of Nemesis

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Camus conceived of his third phase of production as being centered on the Greek Myth of Nemesis. There remains some debate in the literature whether Camus stuck with this conception or if his output deviated slightly from the conception of his work outlined in his notebooks. One thing that is clear is his production in the third phase is more varied in theme than in previous phases. In each of the first two phases, he produced philosophical essays outlining why he chose the Greek figures of that phase. The third phase lacks such a work. Camus's notebooks do show that he had conceived of an essay focusing on Nemesis, but he never produced a systematic explanation of the myth similar to what he did with *The Myth of Sisyphus* or *The Rebel*. This fact notwithstanding, Camus discussed Nemesis at several points, and from those discussions, one can conclude that his choice of Nemesis was meant to convey the importance of measured judgment in the third phase of his work. Information on Nemesis and her role in Greek mythology is more scarce than stories of Sisyphus or Prometheus.

The work of Michael B. Hornum might provide an explanation for why Camus chose Nemesis for this phase. Hornum argues that Homer used the term "nemesis" "to convey the idea of moral blame or indignation." Homer's use of the concept "is used variously as an attribute of gods with regard to the divine/human relationship, and of men with regard to interhuman affairs."[1] Nemesis was an important force in Greek thought. Hornum rightly points out that Nemesis may "reflect an apprehension by the Greeks of the power expressed in Indignation,

[1] Michael Hornum, *Nemesis, the Roman State and the Games* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 6.

divine or human. […] The emergence of Nemesis as the deity embodying Righteous Indignation would represent the growing awareness of such a concept in Greek thought."[2]

The Greek tragedians expanded this divine judgment to cover a range of human behaviors, from mistreatment of the dead, to lacking compassion toward the unlucky, to possessing too much of something, or terrible acts for which one is responsible.[3] The first reason Camus chose this daughter of Night to represent his judgment phase is now clearer; she represents a moral sense that can judge human action.

As previously noted, Camus never wrote an entire essay on Nemesis, so there is no record of his systematic explication of the myth and its importance to him. The good news is that Camus mentioned Nemesis in a number of works, so we know how he viewed her and why she was important to his third phase of artistic production. In the simplest terms, and in association with Nemesis as representing a moral sense, Camus associates Nemesis with moderation. He pursues this theme in, first, his notebooks, later in his essays.

Camus first mentions Nemesis in a notebook entry from 1947. In this entry, he wrote: "Nemesis – the goddess of measure. All those who have overstepped the limit will be pitilessly destroyed." In 1950 he lists Nemesis as the third myth of his plan of production. In January 1951, Camus notes a plan for an essay on fate and lists Nemesis as potentially being associated with it.[4] In January 1956, Camus returns to his plan of production and sheds some light on his third stage. The entry shows that Camus considered a transition period before the third stage that

[2] Ibid., 9.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, 156, 267.

concerned the themes of judgment and exile. After mentioning the period of judgment and exile, he notes that "The third stage is love: […] The method is sincerity."[5]

Having surveyed the works after *The Rebel* and Camus's notebooks, I determined that judgment is a better fit to describe the works Camus produced in the years before his death. My typology incorporates the transitional phase on judgment and exile and attaches them to love. Camus argued that the method of this third phase was sincerity. He kept Nemesis as his guide and his references to Nemesis in his published works lead me to conclude that his conception of judgment is intimately attached to sincerity and love. I will discuss this argument more extensively in my conclusion, but I believe that Camus's works, especially his theater, lead toward a path for moral decision making based on moderation, typified by the Greek notion of sophrosyne.

Camus's discussion of Nemesis in his published works supports the use of judgment as the theme of his third phase of production. In "Helen's Exile" (1948) Camus echoes his thoughts from his notebook entry the year before: "Nemesis, goddess of moderation, not vengeance, is watching. She chastises ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit."[6] This sentence is important because it implies not only that those who do wrong will be chastised, but anyone who seeks vengeance for wrongs done also risks crossing a limit. In this sense, one can see why he was critical of metaphysical rebellion because in seeking to remedy injustice, the rebel becomes a source of injustice.

The only other mention of Nemesis in his published works comes at the conclusion of *The Rebel.* In the section "Moderation and Excess," Camus summarizes the problem with

[5] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1951-1959*

[6] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 149.

modern revolutionary movements; they are ignorant or misconceive "that limit which seems inseparable from human nature and which rebellion reveals." Rebellion without limits can lead to oppression or slavery. For Camus, the only way to remain faithful to true rebellion is to remember that all human actions have their limits. "If the limit discovered by rebellion transfigures everything, if every thought, every action that goes beyond a certain point negates itself, there is, in fact, a measure by which to judge events and men." He explains that "Rebellion, at the same time that it suggests a nature common to all men, brings to light the measure and the limit which are the very principle of this nature." Camus believed that any "process of thought which wanted to take into account the contemporary contradictions of rebellion should seek its inspiration from this goddess [Nemesis]."[7]

It is at the end of *The Rebel* that we see the connection between judgment and love. "Then we understand that rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love. Those who find no rest in God or in history are condemned to live for those who, like themselves, cannot live: in fact, for the humiliated."[8] Camus's works in the third phase highlight humans struggling with exile and judgment. For Camus, the most sincere response to the human condition is love; love of the human condition, and the recognition that all humans share the same exile, so it is important to use proper judgment to not overstep those limits and increase injustice in the world. The first work of his third phase, *The Fall*, serves as a judgment of modern society. The first play of the phase, *Requiem for a Nun*, shows the importance of love and forgiveness of wrongs in human affairs. The second play of the phase, *The Possessed*, highlights how the inability to love can impair judgment. Camus's last original piece of fiction before his death, *Exile and the*

[7] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 294, 294, 294, 296.

[8] Ibid., 304.

Kingdom, begins with a look at exile and ends with a glimpse at a remedy to that exile, namely the judgment to accept that humanity's best chance of finding happiness stems from a sincere evaluation of the human condition. Camus's final short story in the collection, "The Growing Stone," shows that despite human differences, happiness or fulfillment is possible in the forms of friendship and love.

The Fall

Five years after *The Rebel*, Camus returned to the form of the novel with *The Fall*. Like *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, the book takes the first-person form. While *The Stranger* was a stream-of-consciousness collection of Meursault's thoughts before and after his murder of the Arab, and *The Plague* was Rieux's chronicle of the plague that struck Oran, *The Fall* amounts to a confession. The book not only contains the confession of its narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, but it also serves as a critique of post-war European society, as well as, Camus's place in that society.

Camus opens the novel with a quote from Lermontov about the reception of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. Lermontov notes some were critical of his novel for having "held up as a model such an immoral character." Others felt he had shrewdly "portrayed himself and his acquaintances." Finally, Lermontov confesses that his novel "is in fact a portrait, but not of an individual; it is the aggregate of the vices of our whole generation in their fullest expression."[9] With this last statement Camus makes his intent clear, he is writing not so much as a personal confessor, but as a commentator on his entire generation and its failures.

The Fall opens in the tiny bar Mexico City in Amsterdam's red-light district. A stranger offers his services to help an unknown person order a drink from "the worthy ape" who is

[9] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 1.

tending the bar. We eventually learn the visitor is from Paris and the stranger is a former Parisian lawyer who introduces himself as Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Clamence tells his listener that he is now a judge-penitent in Amsterdam. What is a judge-penitent? Clamence will only reveal this in a series of conversations with the listener over five days.

Clamence had worked as a lawyer in Paris, specializing in "noble cases," wearing his heart on his sleeve, and swinging into action where he smelled "the slightest scent of victim on a defendant."[10] His righteousness was not limited to the courtroom; he was quick to help anyone who needed it, whether it was giving directions, helping push a heavy cart, or assisting the blind across the street. He was so pleased by being kind that he would rush to a blind person's aid to reach them before someone else. Clamence tells us of his good deeds and virtue but assures us he is not bragging.

Clamence also tells his listener about a night near the Seine when he felt a sense of "completion" that "cheered" his heart, only to have that feeling interrupted by the sound of laughter from behind him. This moment disturbed him, causing him to rush home. When he looked at himself in the mirror, he noticed "My reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to me that my smile was double."[11] Clamence admits to being troubled by the laughter for a few days before he forgot about it again. Though he claimed to be over the laughter, Clamence admits that he avoided walking over bridges and felt uneasy any time he crossed them in a vehicle.

It is in chapter three that we see Clamence's "noble" mask begin to slip. He confides to his listener that "one can't get along without domineering or being served," and argues that it is

[10] Ibid., 17.

[11] Ibid., 40.

essential to be "able to get angry with someone who has no right to talk back."[12] Later in the chapter, Clamence confesses that one day after the evening he heard laughter he caught himself tipping his hat to a blind man after giving the man some change. At this moment he realizes that his virtue had mostly been performative, done not out of kindness, but out of a need for others to see him doing good and praise him for it. It is here that Clamence admits that he was not good at forgiving others, but he had simply learned to forget offenses.

Clamence realized that he had simply been performing virtue; he desired "not to be the most intelligent or most generous creature on earth" but "to be the stronger, in short, and in the most elementary way."[13] Clamence finally reveals the memory he had repressed that was the source of the laughter on the bridge.

One night while walking home from his mistress's house, he passes a young woman on a bridge. The young woman was staring into the water. Clamence hesitates at this sight for a moment but then passes by. Shortly after, he hears the unmistakable sound of a body splashing into the water. He then hears the young woman screaming for help. Clamence briefly considers the moment but concludes, "Too late, too far…"[14] He decides to keep walking, leaving the woman to drift down the icy river to her death. To avoid any guilt in the matter, Clamence refuses to read the papers for the next few days, trying to forget the woman had ever jumped.

The memory of the young woman on the bridge led Clamence to reevaluate his life. Instead of vowing to become a better person, he decides to be a living example of the duplicity of human beings. He fears being judged, so he works to confess his failures before anyone can

[12] Ibid., 44-45.

[13] Ibid., 55.

[14] Ibid., 70.

judge him for them. In doing so, Clamence ruins his reputation in Paris and eventually moves to Amsterdam to begin life as a judge-penitent. From this new position, he can find men who were like him and lure them into his trap. He will recount his tale and confess his sins so he can undermine the listener's worldview and point out that they too are guilty of espousing values they do not truly possess or embrace.

One of the biggest differences of *The Fall*, from *The Stranger* and *The Plague,* is the setting. Gone are cities in North Africa that have a view of the ocean. *The Fall* is set in gloomy Amsterdam with its "damp mists and grey skies." The change in setting is also reflected in the tone of the novels. Brée argues that "unequivocal innocence was the source of alienation in [*The Stranger*] and of obstinate revolt in [*The Plague*]." In *The Fall* Amsterdam reflects an atmosphere "of guilt, uncertainty and ambiguity."[15] Jean-Baptiste Clamence is the perfect tour guide for such an atmosphere.

As the confession from Clamence continues, we learn that he had only been performing noble acts to receive praise and to be elevated by his society. He admits to weaponizing virtue in order to dominate those around him. "I realized […] that modesty helped me to shine, humility to conquer, and virtue to oppress. I used to wage war by peaceful means and eventually used to achieve, through disinterested means, everything I desired."[16] Cruickshank argues that "[finding] an element of self-interest in morality is not necessarily, of course, to affirm the utter uselessness of morality." Rather, it illustrates "the presence of a disturbing ambiguity in human conduct," which gives rise to a distrust "that envelops both man's capacity to fulfil his ideals and even the very existence of these ideals themselves."[17] Clamence's mistake, of course, is in

[15] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 183.

[16] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 84-85.

inferring from this ambiguity that every human is as duplicitous as himself. His skepticism leads him to dedicate his life to being a judge-penitent who upholds a mirror to his fellows to show them they are no more moral than he and therefore lack the right to judge him for his sins.

By refusing to admit that all humans can have lapses in judgment and that no one has the absolute right to judge others, Clamence represents "in the universe of Camus' fiction the absolute antithesis of the true rebel." This judge-penitent is unwilling to recognize the common human condition of confronting an absurd world; the judge-penitent desires instead to be "above" his fellow humans. Wilhoite argues that instead of the solidarity of true rebellion, Clamence seeks "self-deification, the consolation of a shabby godhood."[18]

In *The Rebel*, Camus argued that "Dialogue on the level of mankind is less costly than the gospel preached by totalitarian regimes in the form of a monologue dictated from the top of a lonely mountain." While Clamence is not a totalitarian leader, he betrays the roots of rebellion by engaging in a monologue, from the top of a mountain. He confesses his sins so that he can sit in judgment of the people he encounters in Mexico City. The refusal of dialogue with fellow humans obscures humans "from one another and [prevents] them from rediscovering themselves in the only value that can save them from nihilism – the long complicity of men at grips with their destiny."[19] Although Clamence is guilty of passing judgment when he lacks the right to do so, Camus uses his character to provide a devastating critique of bourgeois society.

Toward the beginning of the novel, Clamence characterizes modern bourgeois society as a form of unthinking nihilism that can result from falling into a routine where one lives one's life

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[17] John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, 186.

[18] Fred H. Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus's Contribution to Political Thought* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 88, 88.

[19] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, 283-284, 284.

in an unexamined manner from day to day. Clamence compares members of bourgeois society to a pack of piranhas slowly picking away at the flesh of their fellows, eventually leaving "only an immaculate skeleton[.]" He criticizes bourgeois society for being duplicitous itself, joking with his listener that their society is "Judicious too: in all things we are merely 'in a way'."[20] Willhoite discusses this duplicity, pointing out that Camus criticized bourgeois society for supporting a number of parasites who "take three meals a day all their lives, have their fortunes tucked away in safe securities, but who scurry home when there is unrest in the streets."[21]

These parasites pay lip service to the idea of justice, failing to recognize those who suffer from poverty within their own system. This "in a way" manner of living is also reflected in how the bourgeois pass their time. Clamence notes the rigid structure that typifies bourgeois society: "'Here's a job, a family, and organized leisure activities.' And the little teeth attack the flesh, right down to the bone."[22] Brée points out that this "in a way" structuring of our lives leads to an "indifference to time." This focus on getting a job and going about leisure activities can create "subservience to the material world" and "our neglect of that spiritual content of life which is the only human victory over death."[23] Citizens in a bourgeois society can focus so much on the plan of their life that they forget humanity's absurd metaphysical condition. In their planning for tomorrow, these people fail to appreciate the potentialities of human existence today.

In this regard, it is important to remember Camus's use of Lermontov at the opening of the novel. In *The Fall* Camus paints a portrait of his generation, but it is important to remember that Clamence does not speak entirely for Camus. Although Camus was skeptical of bourgeois

[20] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 7, 8.

[21] Fred H. Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus's Contribution to Political Thought*, 144.

[22] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 8.

[23] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 107-108.

society and the way "unquestioning conformity to its mores in effect becomes nihilistic acquiescence in the injustices and spiritual and legal murder sanctioned in Western countries which pride themselves on their antitotalitarianism," he still recognized the importance of work and family in creating a "decent social order."[24] We will see in *Exile and the Kingdom* that Camus still firmly believes it is "through the faces of those we love" that we remember the limits that are to guide our actions.[25]

Exile and the Kingdom

Exile and the Kingdom, a collection of six short stories, was Camus's last original piece of fiction published before his death.[26] In the collection, Camus explores the symbols of exile and kingdom, "indicating in the former sense the various conditions that lead human beings to lives of exile and in the latter sense exploring various symbols of kingdom." Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis provide a useful definition of each of the terms, showing how they apply to the stories in *Exile and the Kingdom*. "Exile is a condition where the values of the community, its *nomos*, as well as its sense of connectedness are absent. The kingdom is that home in which those values are rediscovered and given new credibility and power."[27] Throughout *Exile and the Kingdom* Camus portrays characters who are exiles seeking their place in the world, their own kingdom where they feel they belong.

The first story in the collection, "The Adulterous Wife," tells the story of Janine, a merchant's wife, who accompanies her husband on a business trip to the desert. Throughout the

[24] Fred H. Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus's Contribution to Political Thought*, 144.

[25] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," 153.

[26] The unfinished manuscript for *The First Man* was published after Camus's death.

[27] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience." Paper presented at *Southwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Houston, TX,* March 1996. 45, 48.

trip, Janine recounts how her life has not turned out the way she had expected, and she watches the nomads in the desert, yearning for the freedom they experience. They have no home, they are free to go wherever they wish and are unconcerned about worldly possessions. Janine's husband takes care of her, but he is so involved with his business that it is hard to know if he still loves her. Janine is exiled from the freedom of living a life where one is free to experience life's simple pleasures.

"The Renegade" is a monologue from the point of view of a former priest who has renounced his religion and become consumed with hatred. The young man left his home hoping to teach the savages of the desert the truth of Christianity. The tribe captures and tortures him. He eventually comes to see cruelty as the only consistent force on Earth. His exile "is one of resentment and hatred."[28]

The third story, "The Voiceless," chronicles a group of barrel makers returning from a strike. The men had gone on strike hoping for better wages, but their strike was unsuccessful. The men are resentful of their employer and avoid speaking with him to express their displeasure and show solidarity with one another. The employer vows to give the men their raises when business picks up, reminding the men that despite their differences, they all "still have to work together."[29] During the first day back from the strike, the employer gets a notification that his young daughter has become seriously ill. Yvars, one leader of the artisans, wishes to express his sympathies to his boss but dares not speak for want of breaking solidarity with his coworkers. The men's continued silence "robs them of their humanity towards the suffering of others."[30]

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[28] Ibid., 6.

[29] Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom,* trans. Carol Cosman (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 58.

[30] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," 56.

The fourth story is "The Guest." It centers around a schoolteacher, Daru, who is tasked by law enforcement to escort a prisoner accused of murder to a nearby town. The teacher watches the prisoner overnight, and the next day walks him toward the town. Daru gives the man the choice to continue walking towards town to turn himself in or to head in another direction and join the nomads living out there. The nomads will accept the prisoner and allow him to live out his life among them. The prisoner initially hesitates, but he eventually decides to turn himself in. Daru had believed "his monastic life, his solitude, his love for others and his acceptance of his place, had created a harmony between him and his universe." Despite his best efforts to isolate himself from society and its conflicts, Daru is unable to be alone and the arrival of the Arab breaks him of being "alone in his moral existence."[31]

"Jonas, or The Artist at Work," tells the story of a Parisian artist whose rise to fame leads to his becoming surrounded by admirers who occupy his time to not only create but attend to his family. Many have argued that this work is autobiographical, capturing Camus's struggles with writer's block and his realization that he neglected his marriage. "Flatterers, critics and socialites devour Jonas and leave him no energy to look after his family."[32] The story ends with Jonas dying after isolating himself from his family and his admirers. His final work was a canvas on which one small word was written, either "solitary" or "solidary." Both words describe his condition. "His solidarity with others has been a delusion; he has become the worst of solitary exiles who has betrayed his work and his family."[33]

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[31] English Showalter Jr., *Exile and Strangers: A Reading of Camus's Exile and the Kingdom* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 85, 85.

[32] Patrick McCarthy, *Camus* (New York: Random House, 1982), 272.

[33] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," 60.

The last story in the collection, "The Growing Stone," follows an engineer as he arrives in Brazil to build a dam for a remote village. The engineer, D'Arrast, is seeking a new lease on life. We do not know what he is fleeing, but we know he is seeking a new start. The story follows D'Arrast's journey as he encounters the village's people and befriends a cook who has vowed to carry a piece of a sacred stone to the local church to honor "the good Jesus" for saving his life during a shipwreck. The cook struggles to keep his promise and fails, dropping the stone at his feet. D'Arrast decides to carry the load of the stone for his friend. The story ends with D'Arrast dropping the stone, not at the church, but in the center of the cook's familial hut in the poor part of town, symbolizing an earthly kingdom where humans share burdens and work to ease the suffering of others.

Three of these stories, "The Renegade," "The Guest," and "The Growing Stone," are particularly important for discussing Camus's views on judgment. Each of these essays highlights a character that is not only experiencing exile; they portray a character faced with a decision where good judgment is important.

The Fall was originally intended to be part of *Exile and the Kingdom*, but the combination became too large for the collection of short stories and the novel was published separately. "The Renegade" served as the basis for *The Fall*.[34] Like *The Fall*, "The Renegade" is a monologue from the first-person perspective. It tells the story of a missionary who had been convinced to join the ministry to spread the gospel around the world and improve the lives of listeners.

Unfortunately, the young man, like Clamence, felt the need to be superior to his fellow humans, so he left the seminary to personally convert the inhabitants of the town Taghaza, a

[34] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, 129.

people known for their barbaric ways. He believed the priests were aiming too low. "Converting decent people who are simply a bit lost, that was our priests' pitiful ideal, I despised them for daring so little with so much power."[35]

The young priest reaches Taghaza but soon realizes that he has made a grave mistake. The natives subdue him and take him prisoner. The priest is brutalized and made to witness the power of the natives's religious leader, "the fetish." He notes that he was "sometimes beaten, sometimes not, but always I served the fetish." The cruelty of his captors and the punishment they inflicted on him leads the priest to give up Christianity. He notes "Never had a god so possessed me or enslaved me, my whole life day and night was devoted to him, and pain and absence of pain – wasn't that joy? – were owing to him and even, yes, desire, by dint of witnessing almost every day that impersonal and vicious act that I heard without seeing, since now I had to face the wall or get beaten."[36]

This renegade has been converted and now believes "Only evil can go to the limit and reign absolutely, it must be served in order to establish its visible kingdom." To serve his new masters and punish his former brethren, the renegade plans to murder the priest sent to replace him. It is only after killing his replacement that the missionary doubts if his conversion was correct. After the murder, he vows to "Leave behind that face of hatred" and work to "rebuild the city of God's mercy"[37] by returning home. He never returns home, however, as his story ends with a fistful of salt in his mouth.

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[35] Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, 31.

[36] Ibid., 39, 39.

[37] Ibid., 42, 47.

Like Clamence, the missionary sat in judgment of others and had planned to convince them of the rightness of his viewpoint. Like Clamence, he felt his place was elevated over other men, not with other men. Both Clamence and the missionary suffer a fall because of "the same Promethean desire to be equal to the gods, the *hubris* always followed in the Greek cosmos by a swift and awful appearance of the sphinxlike Nemesis."[38] While Clamence only confesses to being able to judge others, the renegade priest wants to convert the natives to Christianity to prove his superiority to his teachers, not to save the souls of the natives. Clamence's aim as judge-penitent is to serve as a mirror in which members of bourgeois society can contemplate their own shortcomings, allowing him to prove his superiority. The young priest denied the agency of the natives. Like Clamence, the priest dreamed of subjugating others and forcing his adversaries "to kneel on the ground, to capitulate."[39]

As we learned in *The Rebel*, human solidarity stems from the recognition of the common pathos and dignity of all humans. To believe oneself superior to others undermines this solidarity. The priest's failure stems from his hubris which kept him from experiencing a "moment of lucidity concerning his role in the world" or experiencing a "new understanding of his connection with others."[40] Like Clamence, the priest's experience does not lead to an awareness of humanity's common exile, it leads him to believe in universal guilt, a judgment likely to increase human suffering, not ease it.

Camus uses "The Guest" to show that sometimes even moderation is not a straightforward solution to one's problem; some things cannot be easily fixed. Daru had been

[38] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 134-135.

[39] Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, 31.

[40] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, 129-130.

born in the area, and even though it was a rough country to live in, he felt like an exile anywhere else. Through a form of self-exile Daru found contentment "with the little he had and with his rough life"[41] atop the plateau where his school stood. Unfortunately for Daru, the local authorities and a captured prisoner will force him out of his self-exile and into a dilemma that leads to him becoming doubly exiled.

As a schoolteacher, Daru wants no part of criminal justice. He pleads with the law officer to take the prisoner to the next town, but the officer insists Daru take the man, becoming insulted that Daru is so defiant of helping the authorities. Daru relents and takes the prisoner in for the night, all the while hoping the condemned man will flee so he will not have to turn him in. The man does not flee, so Daru is forced to walk the man toward the town the following day. Before they reach the town, Daru tries to avoid sending the man to his death by offering the man a choice between turning himself in or escaping to go live with the nomads. Daru leaves the man to make his decision. The man turns himself in and Daru returns to his school to find a threatening note on his blackboard: "You turned in our brother. You will pay." Camus ends the story by noting: "In this vast country he had loved so much, he was alone."[42]

"The Guest" is a story that recalls the tragedy of miscommunication seen in *The Misunderstanding*. Although Daru is initially skeptical of the prisoner, he recognizes the man's humanity, not only removing the prisoner's chains, but cooking for him and sharing a meal with him. Unfortunately, Daru's good will only goes so far. Bronner notes: "The two characters are closed to one another. They do not speak the same language either concretely or metaphorically. Even good will is of no use in creating a common ground." Bronner reminds us: "Camus had

[41] Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, 69.

[42] Ibid., 86.

already noted in *The Rebel* that it is 'impossible to speak or communicate with a person who has been reduced to servitude,' and that servitude itself gives rise to the 'most terrible of silences,' which 'separates the oppressor from the oppressed.'"[43]

"The Guest" shows how oppressive relationships can cause simple acts of kindness to become tragic. Daru not only offered the prisoner the choice to turn himself in or go live with the nomads, he gave the man money and rations to make a journey towards freedom. One cannot help but think that years of occupying a second-class position in society had led the Arab man to feel less human, so he cannot recognize Daru's good will in trying to allow him to escape punishment for his crime.

In "Helen's Exile" Camus stresses the need for moderation in human action. "The Guest" is an interesting story because it raises questions about whether Daru's judgment to let the prisoner determine his own path was correct. Daru's allowing the man to exercise his own agency in determining whether to turn himself in is praiseworthy, but the man's experience as a second-class citizen may have left him unable to recognize Daru's gesture as a chance to save his life. Having spent his life subjugated, the man could not see Daru's gesture as a recognition that his life was still valuable, despite his crime. Daru could have been more proactive and forced the man to join the nomads, but doing so would take away the man's agency, denying him the respect he deserves as a human being. "The Guest" highlights the difficulty in executing proper judgment as every moral dilemma will be unique in its own way and it is difficult to judge others for their decisions where there is no simple right or wrong answer. The Arab had committed murder, but one can still wonder if he deserved to die for his crime. Daru found himself in a

[43] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist,* 131, 131.

situation in which he could not fully support either system; a position not unlike the one Camus found himself in regarding his beloved Algeria.

It frustrated Daru that the law and colonial government would ask a schoolteacher to send a man to his execution. He was equally frustrated by the Arab man's "idiotic crime" and the fact that he did not know enough to run away after killing his cousin. By the end of the story, Daru is doubly exiled. Exiled not only from the town and its authorities for his defiance and refusal to accompany the Arab to the prison, but exiled from the Arabs for allowing their brother to turn himself in. Daru's decision to allow the prisoner to determine his own path was made from human kindness. Tragically, this act of kindness will likely result not only in the Arab man's death, but in the death of Daru at the hands of the man's Arab brothers.

The last story in *Exile and the Kingdom*, "The Growing Stone," provides readers with a glimpse of the earthly kingdom Camus envisioned as necessary to cope with humanity's absurd condition. The protagonist of the story, a French engineer named D'Arrast, arrives to a remote Brazilian village not only to survey the construction site for a dam, but to find relief from unknown events in his past. Camus notes: "[It was] as if the work he had come here to do were merely a pretext, the occasion for a surprise or an encounter he could not even imagine, but that had been waiting for him, patiently, at the end of the world."[44]

Throughout the story Camus shows D'Arrast to be a judicious man. When he first arrives to town, D'Arrast is drunkenly confronted and harassed by the local police chief over his passport. The town's judge is embarrassed and sends the drunk chief away, asking D'Arrast to decide how the man should be punished for his transgression. D'Arrast refuses to let the man be punished in his name, arguing instead for the judge to "pardon this thoughtless person" so the

[44] Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, 141.

construction project "could begin in a climate of concord and friendship."[45] In this same spirit of concord and friendship, D'Arrast asks to tour the poor quarters of the town without being prompted. He is eager to meet the people whose lives will be improved by the building of the dam.

D'Arrast's judicious nature and refusal to judge others is on full display in his relationship with the shipwrecked cook. When the two men first meet, the cook recounts the tale of his shipwreck and how he vowed to The Good Jesus that if Jesus would save him from drowning, he would carry a large piece of stone to the church in the upcoming ritual to keep his promise to The Good Jesus. After the cook recounts the tale of his shipwreck and rescue, he looks to D'Arrast expecting the engineer to laugh at him. D'Arrast does not laugh at the man's story, telling the cook that he knows "A man has to do what he's promised."[46] The cook appreciates this and enlists D'Arrast's help in making sure the cook does not celebrate too much the night before his procession. Camus notes that D'Arrast felt "vaguely annoyed" because he did not understand what the cook's "ridiculous promise" had to do with him, but he still agreed to help the cook. Despite D'Arrast's best efforts to get the cook to leave early, the local man is too absorbed in the celebrations, leading to his inability to shoulder his burden the next day.

When D'Arrast picks up the cook's piece of stone and begins walking with it, he not only helps the cook fulfill his promise, but he also discovers what had been missing in his own life. The day before the procession D'Arrast had revealed to the cook that he had experienced a moment of despair when someone was about to die through his own fault, but D'Arrast cannot remember if he called out and he regrets that he never made a promise. D'Arrast is able to

[45] Ibid., 147.

[46] Ibid., 144.

"impose the fraternal solidarity" between himself and the cook by "committing his energies to what he takes to be the most genuine of the Cook's desires."[47]

D'Arrast picks up the stone and carries it not to the church, but to the cook's familial hut where the cook's family forms a circle around him and invites him to share a meal with them. The meal's "purpose is not merely to eat; it is instead to share with them, silently, their experience of the sacred character of life."[48] Eubanks and Petrakis note "D'Arrast's nameless joy, this kingdom without a name, is the community built upon pathos."[49]

In *The Rebel*, Camus argues that "Real generosity toward the future lies in giving all to the present."[50] In this statement we see the evolution of Sisyphus and the inspiration of Prometheus: Eubanks and Petrakis describe this "new kingdom" as "nameless, intuitive, and borne in pathos."[51] Good judgment is required not only to ensure that one does not overstep limits in their own life but to recognize when others need help or forgiveness. Camus's plays of this third phase portray characters facing unique moral dilemmas and having to use their judgment to determine the correct course of action, a task that will prove to be easier said than done.

Requiem for a Nun

Freeman notes that Camus's adaptation of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* "enjoyed a success in the Parisian theatre which far exceeded that of his two best original plays,

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[47] English Showalter Jr., *Exiles and Strangers*, 109.

[48] Stephen Eric Bronner, *Camus: Portrait of a Moralist*, 134.

[49] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," 61.

[50] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 304.

[51] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," 61.

Caligula and *Les Justes* [*The Just Assassins].*"[52] Interestingly, Camus was not originally scheduled to be the one to adapt Faulkner's novel to the stage. Camus only inherited the task after his actor friend, Marcel Herrand, passed away. Camus was already familiar with the American author and had been greatly impressed with his works, noting that he believed "[Faulkner] gives us an ancient but always contemporary theme that is perhaps the only tragedy in the world: the blind man stumbling along between his destiny and his responsibilities."[53]

"Steeped in depravity, infanticide, humiliation, and suffering,"[54] *Requiem for a Nun* is arguably Camus's darkest work. As the story unfolds, we discover "an abyss of sufferings buried in the past"[55] that still haunt the main characters. Camus uses the story of the young, well-to-do Stevens family to explore the important role that judgment and forgiveness play in navigating an absurd world full of suffering.

Requiem for a Nun tells the story of Gowan and Temple Stevens as they try to move on with their lives after the death of their infant daughter at the hands of the family's nanny, a black woman named Nancy Mannigoe. The young couple had hired Nancy, a former prostitute, after seeing her being beaten on the streets by a white man who had not paid her for her services. Though this young couple's hiring of Nancy was a kind gesture, we learn that she was hired not only as a nanny but as a confidant to Temple, who as a young woman had been kidnapped and held hostage in a Memphis bordello.

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[52] Edward Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study*, 130-131.

[53] Albert Camus, "Excerpts from Three Interviews," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 317.

[54] Edward Freeman, *The Theatre of Albert Camus: A Critical Study,* 131.

[55] Albert Camus, "Foreword to *Requiem for a Nun*, 1957," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 314.

Temple and Gowan's marriage was strained from the start because of their past sufferings. Gavin arrived at the couple's first date drunk, eventually crashing his car, leading to Temple's kidnapping. During her captivity at the brothel, Temple was never sold, but the pimp who ran the brothel, Popeye, would let one of his men, Red, have sex with her while Popeye watched. Eventually, Temple and Red fell in love but had to keep their romance a secret. Temple wrote Red explicit letters to help pass the time when they were not together. The two lovers eventually found a time to be alone together, but just as Red was climbing into Temple's room, Popeye killed him. Popeye was arrested for Red's murder and Temple was freed, but she found that after Red's death she "didn't care anymore,"[56] so she spent a year abroad in Europe.

Gowan met her in Europe and proposed to Temple out of guilt for having put her into her traumatic situation in the first place. Temple says that the two of them felt that participating in the marriage ceremony and kneeling and saying "We have sinned. Forgive us." would bring the two of them relief from their pasts. She explains that her hope was the marriage would bring her "peace, forgetfulness, [and] love." Beyond these things, Temple also believed that she was hoping for a "reciprocal forgiveness," noting "it's perhaps easy to forgive, but it is difficult to consent to being forgiven."[57]

Unfortunately, the marriage ceremony did not lead to reciprocal forgiveness. Gowan always believed that some part of Temple enjoyed her time in the brothel, leading him to question the parentage of the couple's first child, a son named Bucky. Temple had forgiven Gowan for his drunkenness, but he was so prideful that he believed he did not need forgiveness;

[56] Raynold Gideon, "Albert Camus' Adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun" (Masters thesis, Catholic University of America, 1962), 38.

[57] Ibid.

his marrying Temple was enough. Through all the tension, the couple remained married and eventually welcomed a baby girl to their family.

Shortly after her daughter's birth, Temple is contacted by a man named Pete about her letters to Red. Pete is Red's brother and, like his brother, is a criminal. Instead of blackmailing Temple with the letters, he begins having an affair with her. Nancy discovers that Temple is planning to run off with Pete, leaving Gowan and Bucky behind while she takes her daughter with her. Nancy pleads with Temple to consider the consequences of her actions: She would be leaving Bucky with a man who did not believe he was the boy's father and taking a young child on the road with a criminal. Nancy repeatedly begs Temple to stay and spare her children from the suffering they will experience if their family is torn apart. Temple ignores Nancy's pleas. Having done all she felt she could, Nancy kills the baby girl to stop Temple from leaving, giving up her own life to try and save Bucky, Gowan, and Temple Stevens.

Camus felt that Faulkner was clear in his intentions and writes about those intentions in his foreword to the play: "He wanted the Stevens drama to be knotted and unknotted in the temples built by man to a painful justice that Faulkner does not believe is of human origin. From this point of view, the courthouse can be seen as a temple, the governor's office as a confessional, and the prison as a convent in which the condemned Negro woman atones for her crime, and Temple's."[58] Camus's adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun* is an exploration of the role of forgiveness in personal justice and an exploration of the limits of systematic justice.

In adapting the play Camus notes: "I developed only the role of the husband which I find admirable."[59] Camus's adaptation has two pivotal scenes for Gowan and the development of his

[58] Albert Camus, "Foreword to *Requiem for a Nun*, 1957," 312.

[59] Albert Camus, "Excerpts from Three Interviews," 318.

character: One in which Temple confesses the truth of her past and the role she played in her daughter's death, and another wherein Gowan is given Temple's explicit letters. Throughout most of the play, Gowan displays stubborn pride, refusing to accept Temple's forgiveness and insisting that she be grateful that he married her instead of someone else. Camus uses these two scenes to set Gowan up for a chance at redemption by recognizing his wife's suffering and forgiving her for her past mistakes.

Gowan knows that Temple is withholding information about the night of their daughter's murder, but he does not want her to confess anything because it will embarrass their family. Temple feels guilty letting Nancy be executed without confessing her role in Nancy's decision, so Temple has Nancy's lawyer arrange for Temple to meet with the governor to confess. Temple and the lawyer arrive at the governor's office alone, but Gowan sneaks in and hears Temple's entire confession which explained her time in Memphis until the night of the child's murder. Instead of acknowledging the suffering his wife had experienced and forgiving her for her mistakes, Gowan calls her filth and walks away from her as she begs him not to leave her alone.

Gowan is given a chance at redemption when Nancy has her lawyer give Temple's explicit letters to Gowan so he can destroy them. Nancy's lawyer tells Gowan that the right thing to do would be to burn the letters without reading them. Gowan is initially indignant to this suggestion, arguing that a gentleman would not read them, but he was not sure if he was a gentleman. The lawyer tells Gowan: "You can prove you are. Forget the gentle! Being a man will be sufficient."[60] Nancy's lawyer sends Gowan home with the letters, telling him to go home to see his son and burn the letters before perhaps returning to pick up his wife. The play ends with Gowan returning to pick up Temple and take her home to their son. We never see Gowan

[60] Raynold Gideon, "Albert Camus' Adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun," 63.

destroy the letters, but Nancy's dialogue implies he did. "If he had read them, he'd be gone, he'd had left you for always. There are certain words one can't ever forget. But he burnt them right away. He'll never leave you again, neither you, nor Bucky; except if you leave yourself."[61]

Camus uses the story of Gowan Stevens to portray the tragedy of someone "stumbling along between his destiny and his responsibilities."[62] Although Gowan was at fault for his drinking and stubbornness, he also experienced the suffering of feeling guilty for Temple's abduction and the loss of his child. Gowan displayed poor judgment in not accepting Temple's forgiveness, but he does eventually realize his responsibility to Temple and their son. In the end, Gowan recognizes that he is not the only one who has suffered, and to continue thinking only of himself will cause more pain for Temple and Bucky.

Temple Stevens is like Dr. Rieux in her refusal to believe that suffering has any purpose, whether it be to teach, to punish, or provide a path to salvation in a world to come. Temple's experience of suffering, from her kidnapping and captivity, to her strained marriage, to the murder of her daughter, is viewed as mere suffering, perhaps absurd suffering. Temple's long experience of suffering impaired her judgment, causing her to forget her duties as a mother.

During Temple's confession to the governor, Nancy's lawyer reveals that Temple had viewed the arrival of her and Gowan's first child as a chance for redemption for both of them. The lawyer explains: "It was a sort of armistice with God in which she consented, on her side to suffer all, to renounce to all, even the most simple pleasures, so that an innocent infant may be preserved from soil and terror."[63] This chance at redemption and protecting her child from

[61] Raynold Gideon, "Albert Camus' Adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun," 66.

[62] Albert Camus, "Excerpts from Three Interviews," 317.

[63] Raynold Gideon, "Albert Camus' Adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun," 40.

suffering was shattered when Pete showed up with the letters. Pete's arrival reminded Temple of the freedom she felt in Memphis and the feeling of affection her husband had denied her. Of course, Temple's seduction by Pete would set into motion the tragic chain of events that led to the baby's death. Temple's selfish desire to obtain happiness for herself impaired her judgment; she was prepared to leave her husband and the son she had vowed to protect from suffering. Nancy begged Temple to come to her senses and pay off Pete, but Temple wanted to get away too much, leaving Nancy to make the only choice she felt she could make, trade her own life for that of the happiness of the Stevens family.

While Nancy was the one who murdered the baby, Temple recognizes her culpability in the tragedy but initially refuses to admit it. Temple knows the embarrassment that will stem from her confession, but her guilt cannot allow her to let Nancy die without the truth being known. Temple's confession to the governor represents her appeal to the systematic justice system humanity has established for itself. Ultimately, the governor upholds Nancy's conviction, noting that he is powerless to change it. This refusal to pardon the murderess, even after the mother admits her fault in the event, highlights how human justice can sometimes be incomplete. The governor, even though he knows that Temple has forgiven Nancy for killing her daughter, cannot pardon Nancy because of the social pressure on him. Even in the context of a play, we see that established institutions of justice are not always adequate.

Although Camus tried to be faithful to Faulkner's original work, he did make a few changes that bring his adaptation more in line with his philosophy. As I noted above, Camus expands the role of Gowan, allowing for Gowan to decide what to do with the letters and partake in the forgiveness and redemption that Nancy had hoped for the young family. A second change Camus makes is in reworking the last scene. In Faulkner's novel, the final act features speeches

by Nancy and her lawyer "on faith and Christ." Camus notes: "Faulkner reveals herein his strange religion, […] a religion less strange in its substance than in the symbols he proposes for it. Nancy decides to love her suffering and her own death, like many great souls before her; but, according to Faulkner, she thus becomes a saint, the strange nun who suddenly invests the bordellos and prisons in which she has lived with the dignity of a cloister."[64]

Brée argues that Camus was more interested in Nancy than the Stevens family because "She belongs to this world. Without her, his *Requiem* would be a rather dubious, somewhat tiresome morality play."[65] She notes that for Camus, Nancy represents "the fall incurred by individuals and societies who, in some manner, lose touch with the mystery of man's concrete presence and incarnation in the flesh, that 'truth of the body' which escapes all reason."[66] In other words, Nancy borders on the edge of becoming a metaphysical rebel.

Nancy's decision to murder the baby represents tragic judgment influenced by her belief that suffering in this world can be a means to salvation in another. Nancy's belief that Jesus will forgive her and reunite her with the baby in Heaven clouds her judgment. Just before she murders the baby Nancy chastises Temple, noting: "You don't know that little children must not be ashamed, or afraid. It's from this that they must be protected. All of them. Or as many as we can protect. Even only one, if we can't do better. But to do all we can for that one."[67] Nancy's belief in an afterlife clouded her judgment. Her faith in another world where the child would not suffer led her to assume that the best way to protect the child was to kill it. In her quest to relieve the suffering of children, Nancy plays God and takes an innocent life.

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[64] Albert Camus, "Foreword to *Requiem for a Nun*, 1957," 315.

[65] Brée, *Camus*, 164.

[66] Ibid., 164-165.

[67] Raynold Gideon, "Albert Camus' Adaptation of William Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun," 51.

Typical of his own sense of the world and faithfulness to it, Camus shuns a religious path to redemption. Camus's reworked final scene represents his worldview that any hope for redemption must come in this world, not another. During his final scene, Temple begs Nancy not to leave her. Nancy encourages Temple to have faith: "You are not alone. 'He is the river and the rock. He will wash and dry our wounds. He will deliver us from the torment of Death.'" Temple cannot accept this. She tells Nancy she cannot trust Jesus because of all of the sufferings He had allowed the two women to experience. Temple calls out for immanent help: "Anybody, to save me, to help me. Anybody, so's not to be alone, on this unhappy earth, with this vain heart, with this corrupted heart."[68] It is at this point that Camus has Gowan arrive at the prison after destroying the letters. The couple leaves the prison together to return home to their son Bucky.

Camus's ending implies that Gowan has forgiven himself and Temple. He returned to save his wife so they can work together to offer their son a life free from suffering. The tragedy or truth of reality is that they will not. For Camus, the corpus of his work is to remain faithful to that which activates the human moral sense and that is pathos. Try as we might, we will never be able to remove suffering from the world, but with good judgment, we can at least work to mitigate it without attempting to be gods.

Camus's adaptation of Faulkner's novel highlights the importance of measuredness in Camus's thinking. In *The Fall*, Clamence's inability to forgive himself results in his belief that everyone is as guilty as he is, so he takes it upon himself to serve as judge-penitent to everyone he encounters. At the end of the novel, Clamence observes: "[W]e have lost track of the light, the mornings, the holy innocence of those who forgive themselves."[69] Gerald Stourzh reminds

[68] Ibid., 70, 71.

us that Camus argued "man is not good, he is better or worse."[70] By the end of *Requiem for a Nun,* we hope that through the forgiveness of one another, Gowan and Temple are both better than when the play began. Humanity can never achieve a true good, but only strive to be better or worse than before.

Each of the three main characters in *Requiem for a Nun* suffers, but each of them is also guilty and the creator of their own suffering. While the play portrays the universality of guilt that Clamence derided, it offers a potential respite from suffering in the form of forgiveness. In *The Rebel* Camus argues "that rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love. Those who find no rest in God or in history are condemned to live for those who, like themselves, cannot live: in fact, for the humiliated."[71] Camus closes his adaption of *Requiem for a Nun* by showing us two parents humiliated by their pasts, going home together to try to forgive one another and protect their remaining innocent son from suffering.

The Possessed

Camus admired Dostoevsky, noting at several points in his life how influential the author had been on his thinking. He was particularly fond of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*. Camus notes: "*The Possessed* is one of the four or five works that I rank above all others. In many ways I can claim that I grew up on it and took sustenance from it."[72] Brée notes that the works of both men shared similar themes including "characters who play their lives out on

[69] Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 145.

[70] Gerald Stourzh, "The Unforgiveable Sin: An Interpretation of 'The Fall,'" *Chicago Review* 15, no. 1 (1961), 52.

[71] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 304.

[72] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts*, v.

desperate intellectual premises carried to their logical extremes."[73] *The Possessed* is filled with characters who play out their lives in such a manner, and with disastrous results.

For Camus, *The Possessed* "is a prophetic book, this is not only because it prefigures our nihilism, but also because its protagonists are torn or dead souls unable to love and suffering from that inability, wanting to believe and yet unable to do so – like those who people our society and our spiritual world today."[74] Camus's adaptation of the novel is a study of Dostoevsky's characters and the way they become so singularly possessed by particular ideas that they lose the ability to properly judge their actions in a world filled with suffering.

The Possessed tells the story of a group of misguided young men as they each embark on a rebellious journey in a world of human suffering. One of the young men, Nicholas Stavrogin, displays indifference to the world. Another, an engineer, Kirilov, tries to maintain a solitary nihilism and use his suicide as a beacon to humanity for their freedom from traditional rules. A third, Peter Verkhovensky, the son of a professor, wants to destroy the existing system and gain power for himself. In their midst, a young student named Shatov, who recently disavowed Peter's revolutionary group, wants to find a way to connect with those who suffer in the world and meets a tragic end in doing so.

In the play, we first meet the "exiled" liberal professor, Stepan Trofimovich Verhkhovensky. The narrator of the play, Anton Grigoriev, describes Stepan to the audience. He notes that the professor "had always played a thoroughly patriotic role among us. He was liberal and idealistic, loving the West, progress, justice, and generally everything lofty." Grigoriev goes on to note that "on those heights he unfortunately fell to imagining that the Tsar

[73] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 196.

[74] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts*, vi.

and his Ministers had a particular grudge against him, and he settled among us to play the part of the persecuted thinker in exile."[75]

Throughout the play, we see that Stepan, though he may be a man of intelligence, is not a man of action. He has been living with the noblewoman Varvara Stavorgin for many years, serving as tutor to her son Nicholas and other young men in the play, all the while preparing to write a book espousing his great thoughts. The problem is Stepan's book, even after fifteen years, remains in the brainstorming phase. Stepan considers himself a man of principle, but he is mostly a man of little action. He tells Varvara: "Standing up or lying down, the important thing is to personify the idea. Besides, I am active, I am active, and always according to my principles. This very week I signed a protest."[76] When pressed for details about the cause his protest was supporting, Stepan reveals the shallowness of his advocacy, noting, "We had to protest, that is all."[77]

From the play's beginning we see that although he may have great ideas, Stepan is unwilling to do much more than discuss them: "I am well aware that we talk too much. We talk when we ought to act. Act, act…or, in any case, work. For twenty years now I have been sounding the alarm and urging people to work. Russia can't arise without ideas."[78] We see in this statement Stepan's idealism. He speaks of helping the masses, counting himself as one who loves the people, but he merely talks of changing Russia, never acting to do so. In Stepan Camus portrays a character who resembles Jean-Baptiste Clamence. Indeed, Clamence's life is plagued

[75] Ibid., 3, 3.

[76] Ibid., 7.

[77] "*Il fallait protester, voilà tout."* Ibid.

[78] Ibid., 13.

by what he did not do that night at the bridge in Paris. Stepan never acts and only speaks of changing the lives of others.

Stepan's possession is his idealism. His possession is not particularly dangerous by itself, after all, he only speaks of things and never acts. Unfortunately, Stepan, with his liberal humanist beliefs, inspires the next generation in ways he never imagined. *The Possessed* is a story of generational changes in thinking about the world and the results those changes can have on society. Of course, Stepan only ever discussed ideas, but the questioning of values and emphasis on reason espoused by men of his generation led to the next generation questioning the existence of truth itself. Stepan's pupil Nicholas Stavrogin, an engineer named Kirilov, and Stepan's son Peter Verkhovensky, are all nihilists, but each draws their own conclusions on how to move forward in a world they believe has no meaning.

Camus noted that the subject of his adaptation was "just as much the murder of Shatov as the spiritual adventure and death of Stavrogin, a contemporary hero."[79] Throughout the play, many characters express admiration for Nicholas Stavrogin. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Camus's statement was not an endorsement of Stavrogin, but an indictment of contemporary society. Indeed, it can be argued that most of the forms of "possession" seen in the other characters "emanate" from Stavrogin's.[80]

Camus discusses Stavrogin's nihilism in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, noting that he "[tries] out the absurd truths in practical life."[81] Nicholas takes the absurd discovery as a means of liberation from moral rules. Before Nicholas ever appears in the play, his mother Varvara and Stepan

[79] Ibid., vi.

[80] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 166.

[81] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 109.

discuss rumors spreading through the town of his indecent behavior abroad. Nicholas is a serial philanderer, having several mistresses, including the wife of his friend Shatov. Camus points out that Nicholas's response to the revelation of absurdity is to lead an ironic life. For Camus, "He is a tsar of indifference."[82]

This indifference is on display throughout the play. When Nicholas first arrives back home, he causes a scene by leading one of his mother's friends around by the nose after the man had continually used the expression, "I will not be led around by the nose." His behavior was unbecoming of an aristocrat, but Nicholas's nihilism has caused him to disregard even the most basic aspects of social etiquette. Stavrogin is a complicated character because he does not appear to be purely evil. From time to time he does do praiseworthy things: he marries and cares for a disabled young woman named Maria and he warns Shatov that Peter may try and have him murdered. Stavrogin is a man so troubled by the absurd discovery that he becomes indifferent to actions and their consequences. He has no clear regard for good and evil.

Nicholas Stavrogin's spiritual journey is used to illustrate that passive nihilism can lead to active moral indifference, where one no longer feels any emotion, good or bad. The pinnacle of Stavrogin's moral depravity comes when he sexually abuses a young girl. Though he claims to have only kissed her, the young girl's reciprocation of his affection, followed by his turning away, leads her to feel shame at the loss of her innocence. She falls ill from the stress of keeping their secret and eventually hangs herself to relieve the anguish she felt. Nicholas felt no fault for her death, only relief that he was now the only one who knew about the incident, thereby allowing him to escape any culpability for his actions.

[82] Ibid.

Camus notes that Stavrogin's farewell letter in the novel confesses: "I have not been able to detest anything."[83] This inability to find revulsion at unspeakable acts shows how Nicholas could easily seduce the wife of his friend Shatov or be willing to consider helping Peter carry out his destructive revolution. Even when he confesses his secret about the little girl to a priest the priest detects pride and defiance in Nicholas's confession. The priest tells him "Sensuality and idleness have made you insensitive, incapable of loving, and you seem proud of that insensitivity. You are proud of what is shameful. That is despicable."[84] Nicholas was possessed by a form of nihilism that is sensual, idle, prideful, and incapable of love.

As noted above, Nicholas Stavrogin exerts influence over several of the characters in the play. One of these characters is an engineer named Kirilov. In the play, it is revealed that Nicholas had encouraged Kirilov in his nihilism while at the same time encouraging Kirilov's roommate, a young man named Shatov, in his blossoming faith. Nicholas's encouragement of Kirilov's nihilism leads the young engineer to resolve to kill himself in order to prove humanity's freedom. If Nicholas displays an indifferent nihilism, it can be argued that Kirilov tries to embody a solitary nihilism.

I use the term solitary nihilism to describe Kirilov because even though he is convinced of the meaninglessness of the world, he does not go out of his way to undermine the beliefs of others. Kirilov spends hours each night contemplating life and its lack of meaning. Through this contemplation, he has determined that "It is a matter of indifference whether we live or die."[85] This discovery leads Kirilov to resolve to kill himself to serve as an example to humanity that

[83] Ibid.

[84] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts,* 137.

[85] Ibid., 34.

life is meaningless and God is not watching. Camus also discusses Kirilov in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, noting that "it is not despair that urges him to death, but love of his neighbor for his own sake."[86] Of course, by the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus has rejected suicide as a solution to the absurd, and in *The Possessed* he uses Kirilov to show that even though the engineer believed he was liberating his neighbors, he ends up becoming responsible for the death of a friend.

Kirilov becomes so possessed by the desire to use his suicide as a wake-up call to humanity of their true condition that he allows himself to be used in a murder scheme. Peter Verkhovensky, Stepan's estranged son, convinces Kirilov to take the blame for the murder of a young man named Shatov who had just disavowed Peter's revolutionary group. Although Kirilov might have been praised for not trying to actively undermine society even though he was convinced of the world's meaninglessness, Kirilov's indifference and willingness to take the blame for Shatov's murder recalls Meursault's letter for Raymond, "Both acts originate in a state of alienated indifference in the protagonists to the ethical values of their society."[87]

Kirilov displays poor judgment by accepting the blame for Shatov's murder. While Kirilov's nihilism had been solitary until that point, it becomes active in his willingness to provide Peter with a scapegoat for the group's murder. Even though Kirilov and Shatov were roommates and had struggled together in America, Kirilov allowed his nihilism and indifference to traditional norms to overshadow any loyalty to another human being except Nicholas. Camus is critical of people who take the absurdity of the world to mean a right to unlimited freedom. "The absurd does not liberate; it binds. It does not authorize all actions. 'Everything is

[86] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 109.

[87] Ray Davison, *Camus: The Challenge of Dostoevsky* (Exeter, Devon, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 156.

permitted' does not mean that nothing is forbidden.'"[88] The irony of Kirilov's suicide is that he took his own life to prove to humanity their freedom, but his indifference to the consequences of his actions deprived Shatov, a friend, of the freedom to continue living his life.

At its core, Camus's adaptation of *The Possessed* revolves around the return of two sons to their small hometown in Russia. The first son to return is Nicholas Stavrogin, the son of a noblewoman who has returned home as an indifferent nihilist. The second son to return is the son of Stepan Verkhovensky, Peter Verkhovensky. Unlike Nicholas or Kirilov, Peter is an active nihilist who wants to create a revolution in Russia, beginning with his father's town.

Peter resents his father; not only for sending him away to be raised by his aunts but for being a man who only speaks of lofty ideas, never taking action to realize those ideas. Peter is possessed by a desire for action and change. Unlike his father, Peter takes direct action, forming a clandestine revolutionary group to sow chaos in town and to start a political revolution. Peter is so consumed by the need for action that he willingly admits his boredom with the discussion of ideas. "Writing and constructing systems is just nonsense. An aesthetic pastime. You are simply bored here, that's all."[89]

One cannot help but picture Peter's father Stepan when Peter is criticizing tired discussions of a better future. Peter wants radical change, and soon. He tells his group that he would be willing to lop off "a hundred million heads" if it meant faster progress towards his desired goals. Throughout the play Peter expresses his desire for radical change, even telling his father: "*I* say that men must act. I'll destroy everything and others will construct. No more

[88] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 67.

[89] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts,* 118.

reform and no more improvement. The more things are improved and reformed, the worse it is. The sooner people begin to destroy, the better it is."[90]

Although Peter's words sometimes claim to want a better future for humanity, his deeds prove that he has little regard for human life. He not only admitted to being willing to kill millions, but he also manipulates his revolutionary group to bond together by murdering their former comrade Shatov. Peter had been looking for a way to ensure his group remained loyal and Nicholas, being a tsar of indifference, suggested that Peter have the group bond through a shared crime, specifically murder. Peter, ever the conniver, not only convinces his group to murder Shatov, he manipulates Kirilov into taking the blame for Shatov's death in his suicide note.

Peter's possession by a desire for action, coupled with his nihilism is dangerous. Although he formed his group under the guise of a better future for humanity, Peter has a low opinion of humanity and has no genuine desire to create a better future. He seeks only power for himself. He explains to Nicholas: "we need one or two thoroughly immoral generations; we need an exceptional, revolting corruption that will transform man into a filthy, cowardly, and selfish insect."[91] Camus's adaptation of *The Possessed* shows that Peter need not wait for those immoral generations to arrive. He, Nicholas, and Kirilov all display a corruption that shows how selfish and cowardly humans can be.

While *The Possessed* features three young men with torn or dead souls who are unable to love, it also features one young man, Shatov, who shows that the human condition is not entirely hopeless; one just needs to possess the good judgment to cope with it. Shatov is the true hero of

[90] Ibid., 69-70.

[91] Ibid., 128.

The Possessed because he represents someone who recognizes the absurdity of the world and realizes that it binds him to those who share his condition and does not free him to act with no regard for good or bad.

From the play's start, Shatov reveals himself to be at odds with the thinking of his peers, criticizing them for being out of touch with the common man. He criticizes them for their lack of commitment:

> You don't love either Russia or the masses. You have lost contact with the masses. You talk of them as if they were a distant tribe with exotic customs that move you to pity. You have lost track of them, and without the masses, there is no god. This is why all of you and all of us, yes, all of us, are so wretchedly cold and indifferent. We are merely out of step, nothing else.[92]

Shatov's statement captures the essence of Camus's view of good judgment; the ability to recognize the common pathos of human being and embracing the shared condition by alleviating suffering without adding to it.

Although he had initially sympathized with socialist ideals, Shatov distanced himself from Peter's group. He turned from the path of nihilism towards the path of Christianity. Shatov is unique amongst the group of young men in the play not only because he has turned towards faith instead of indifference, but because he still believes that some things are honorable, rebutting Peter's question that "[H]onor is a vague word, isn't it?" At this point, it is important to clarify that Camus portrays Shatov's Christianity as helping inform his worldview, not dominate it. Shatov confesses to Nicholas "I *shall* believe in God one day."[93]

Camus does not admire Shatov's Christianity but the way Shatov lets the example of Christ serve as a guide to his action, working to love those around him, regardless of the wrongs

[92] Ibid., 15.

[93] Ibid., 57, 80.

they have committed. Camus's characterization of Shatov is of a young man who is very much concerned with the suffering in this world, not a perfected one to come. Shatov admits he does not believe in God, but he does "[B]elieve in Russia, in its orthodoxy, in the body of Christ."[94]

Shatov is unique amongst the young men in the play because he is driven by love and sympathy for others. Although he is unable to fully believe in God, he can understand that he, as well as everyone else, is living in an absurd world. Shatov diagnoses Nicholas's problem as stemming from an inability to love. He tells Nicholas: "You cannot love anyone because you are a man without roots and without faith. Only men who have roots in the soil can love and believe and build. The others destroy."[95] Shatov is a builder, not a destroyer.

Shatov's kindness towards others is unique among the young men in the play. Although he slaps Nicholas for having seduced his wife, Shatov still wishes for his friend to turn his own life around and leave behind his doubt and debauchery. Among all of the young men in *The Possessed*, Shatov is the most admirable. Richard Curle characterizes him as "the pure idealist with the soul of a saint."[96] Shatov's kind soul is on display at several points in Camus's adaptation, not only in his hope that Nicholas will turn from his debauchery and seek forgiveness but in his love for his wife. Brée argues that "The hope that Dostoevsky put in God, Camus, in his play, seems to place in man, in the love of Shatov for his wife, in the affection that links Stepan Trofimovich to Varvara Stavrogin." She goes on to argue that even though compassion is rarely seen in *The Possessed*, it "negates the scornful image of man which inspires [Peter] Verkhovensky's acts."[97]

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[94] Ibid., 79.

[95] Ibid., 81-82.

[96] Richard Curle, *Characters of Dostoevsky: Studies from Four Novels* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 135.

[97] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 166-167, 167.

Shatov is a man of principle in a world where those around him refuse to recognize principles. Though he cannot fully believe in God, Shatov recognizes the importance of being able to make judgments over what is honorable by using love and understanding of humanity's common condition as a guide. Shatov's actions in the play personify Camus's statement: "I have a good deal of affection for the first Christian. I admire the way he lived, the way he died. My lack of imagination keeps me from following him any further."[98] Unable to have faith in a life to come, Camus placed his faith in action in this world. This action must be informed by the recognition of the common suffering that is the human condition. This helps us recognize limits to our actions. Camus's faith comes from a belief in the need to engage that suffering without destroying and, instead, build through love.

Camus tells us that "What distinguishes the modern sensibility from the classical sensibility is that the latter thrives on moral problems and the former on metaphysical problems."[99] The danger of the wrong conclusion to the modern problem is nihilism or moral indifference. One becoming too concerned with finding an ultimate meaning for human existence can lead to one ignoring the meaningful parts of human existence. Camus's plays show this to be the ultimate tragedy.

[98] Albert Camus, "Excerpts from Three Interviews," 320.

[99] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 104.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated how Camus's theatrical output relates to his novels and philosophical essays, noting the thematic overlap between his works during each phase of his production. Having shown that Camus was methodical with his production, I would like to conclude my study with a focus on why it has been important to study Camus's theater. This requires an examination of Camus's thoughts on art in general and the form of tragic drama in particular. Indeed, Camus's expectations for a revival of tragic drama never occurred, even though the conditions for such a revival seemed evident. Most important and in spite of the absence of such a revival, what do Camus's plays tell us about judgment?

Camus and The Theater

I opened this study by explaining Camus's conception of fictional art and its role in society. As noted in the introduction, Camus was critical of "art for art's sake." He believed that it was too much the self-absorbed activity. Instead, he argued that the best works of fiction will strive for "an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality, each forcing the other upward in a ceaseless overflowing, characteristic of life itself at its most joyous and heart-rending extremes."[1] Camus made these comments in 1957, only three years before his death, but they are similar to remarks found in the manifesto of the Théâtre du Travail, the communist-inspired theater group he helped form in the 1930s. The group's manifesto argued that mass literature was important, and art must avoid being too lofty by staying in "its ivory tower." The group maintained that "[t]he sense of beauty is inseparable from a certain sense of humanity."[2]

[1] Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 265.

[2] Ilona Coombs, *Camus, Homme de Théâtre,* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1968), 12.

Although both sets of comments were given some twenty years apart, they show that Camus's commitment to art that reflected on the human condition was a lifelong passion.

Knowing Camus's views on art and the role of the artist, it is no surprise that he was fond of Greek tragedy, an art form nearly synonymous with contemplation of the human condition. There were three main areas of Greek life in the fifth century: The Assembly, The Courts, and The Festival of Dionysus. Although the assembly and the courts were places that one would most associate with political life, the festival of Dionysus was also an important part of political life in Athens. Simon Goldhill notes: "The institution of theatre is analogous to the two other great Athenian democratic institutions for the staging of speeches, the law-court and the assembly. Each congregates a body of citizens, constituted in a privileged way as the collective of the polis, and requires the hearing and judging of arguments in a competitive context." He further notes: "tragedy was as close as one could come to a theoretical institution…In its form, content and context of performance, tragedy provided, by example and by precept, a critical consideration of public life…Drama was a theoretical act."[3] Indeed, the theater moved beyond theory to a deliberative art, moving citizens to consider and discuss the issues raised by the tragic poets.

As the preceding chapters have made clear, Camus did not believe that the theater was the artist's only mode of expression, but he possessed a lifelong affinity for theater and argued that it was "the highest of literary forms, and certainly the most universal."[4] At several points in his career, he discussed his love for the theater and his preference for the kind of play that "[involves] human fate in all its simplicity and grandeur." He notes "Without claiming to equal

[3] Simon Goldhill, "Greek Drama and Political Theory," in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Thought*, eds. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61, 62.

[4] Albert Camus, "Why I Work in the Theatre," *Today's Speech* 10, no. 4 (1962): 9.

them, these are at least the models to set oneself."[5] Camus's love for the theater and affinity for plays examining human fate led him to form specific opinions on the tragic form, opinions he would outline in a lecture delivered in Athens in 1955. Examining his views on tragedy can help us understand and evaluate the substance and purpose of his own dramas, particularly regarding the nature of judgment, authentic or otherwise.

Camus opened his lecture, "On the Future of Tragedy," by noting the rarity of periods of great tragic theater. He attributes this rarity to the fact that great tragic art arises only "during centuries of crucial change, at moments when the lives of whole peoples are heavy both with glory and with menace, when the future is uncertain and the present dramatic." He argued that in all of history, there had only been two great ages of tragedy: the first in Greece from Aeschylus to Euripides, and the second in countries in Western Europe, particularly England, Spain, and France between the 16th and 17th centuries. Camus felt that "Both periods mark a transition from forms of cosmic thought impregnated with the notion of divinity and holiness to forms inspired by individualistic and rationalistic concepts."[6] He notes that tragic ages seem to "coincide with an evolution in which man, consciously or not, frees himself from an older form of civilization and finds that he has broken away from it without yet having found a new form that satisfies him."[7] This search for some sort of connection between sacred forms, which he did not think were wise to abandon in substance, but perhaps necessary to do so in form, preoccupied him throughout his life.

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[5] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1962), x.

[6] Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 296, 297.

[7] Ibid., 298.

After outlining the conditions in which tragic art may arise, Camus moves on to discuss his conception of what constitutes tragedy. For him what separates tragedy from other forms of drama or melodrama is the fact that "the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified." In a drama or melodrama only one force will be legitimate. Ambiguity is what makes tragedy possible and necessary. The forces opposing one another in a tragedy are "at the same time both good and bad." He argues that in a melodrama it is made clear that "Only one is just and justifiable" while a perfect tragic formula would show "All can be justified, no one is just."[8]

If both sides have some claim to being justified then it becomes important to seek a resolution of the two, else claims to truth can devolve into self-righteous universals, which of course, lead to tragic consequences. This why the classical Greek chorus "generally advises prudence." This prudence recognizes that "up to a certain limit everyone is right," but the "person who, from blindness or passion, oversteps this limit is heading for catastrophe if he persists in his desire to assert a right he thinks he alone possesses. The constant theme of classical tragedy, therefore, is the limit that must not be transgressed."[9]

Camus argues that the ideal tragedy revolves around this tension "since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers, each of which wears the double mask of good and evil." He notes that in its purest form, the tragic play will come down to tension between two specific forces: "on the one hand, man and his desire for power, and on the other, the divine principle reflected by the world." Tragedy occurs "when man, through pride (or even through stupidity as in the case of Ajax) enters into conflict with the divine order, personified by a god or

[8] Ibid., 301, 301, 301.

[9] Ibid., 301, 301-302.

incarnated in society. And the more justified his revolt and the more necessary this order, the greater the tragedy that stems from the conflict."[10]

In his lecture, Camus explains that another reason that the tragic form is so rare is the delicacy of the balance between the two opposing forces. "If the divine order cannot be called into question and admits only sin and repentance, there is no tragedy. There can only be mysteries or parables." Camus is critical of this because it forces humanity to renounce its passions to "embrace spiritual truth." Of course, the opposite can be true as well. "On the other hand, everything that frees the individual and makes the universe submit to his wholly human law, especially by the denial of the mystery of existence, once again destroys tragedy."[11] For Camus, the ideal tragedy will feature a constant tension between the human desire to overcome a natural order and a natural order that pushes back against the human desire for unlimited freedom.

Camus makes sure to note that a tragedy that ends in death or punishment should be seen not to be punishing "the crime itself but the blindness of the hero who has denied balance and tension."[12] The Greeks Camus admired were only concerned with settling a particular account (as in the case of Prometheus rebelling against Zeus, not the entire order of being). In *The Rebel* Camus argues that for the Greeks "there were more mistakes than crimes, and the only definitive crime was excess."[13] Tragedy was important because it helped show that an order to the world existed and no matter how painful that order might be, "it is still worse not to recognize that it exists. The only purification comes from denying and excluding nothing, and thus accepting the

[10] Ibid., 302, 302, 302.

[11] Ibid., 302-303, 303, 303.

[12] Ibid., 304.

[13] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 28.

mystery of existence, the limitations of man – in short, the order where men know without knowing."[14] In its essentials, tragic art was important because it helped the Greeks understand the world and humanity's place in it.

Camus ends his lecture by explaining why he thought that his age might be due for a renaissance of the tragic form. Having lived in a century that saw two world wars and an emerging Cold War, Camus felt that he was living in a "tragic climate." He did believe that little by little the individual was beginning to recognize the existence of limits. He explains: "Today, man proclaims his revolt, knowing this revolt has limits, demands liberty though he is subject to necessity; this contradictory man, torn, conscious henceforth of human and historical ambiguity, is the tragic man."[15] Despite the encouraging notion that some were beginning to recognize the importance of limits, Camus's hope for a revival of the tragic form never came to fruition.

A Failed Revival

The failure of tragedy to experience a modern renaissance raises the question of whether the form still applies to the modern world. The true answer to this question is beyond the scope of my study, but I would like to offer a few brief thoughts on the matter.

Max Weber's 1919 lecture, "Science as a Vocation," is a good starting point for exploring whether the modern world still has a place for tragic art. In his lecture Weber questions whether humanity was becoming too reliant on the faculties of reason. Weber argues that an overreliance on science and technology results in a world where "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means the world is disenchanted."[16] The scientific breakthroughs being made

[14] Ibid., 304, 305.

[15] Ibid., 306-307.

in the modern world had led to a belief in an unending arc of progress. It was only a matter of time before everything could be explained through reason and science.

Weber raises the question as to whether or not scientific knowledge has any meaning "beyond the purely practical and technical." He uses the work of Tolstoy to make the point that although science is helpful for some aspects of our lives, it does not answer what are potentially the most important questions in life: "What shall we do and how shall we live?"[17] Perhaps the failure to see a revival of tragic art stems from modernity's faith in reason and technology, its condition of "disenchantment." Humanity's faith in reason and technology led to a desire for the same certainty and clarity from value judgments as found in the hard sciences. The problem is that level of certainty and clarity is impossible in value judgments. In the face of this uncertainty, people begin to turn away from considering value judgments as well as the search for a meaningful existence.

Much like Weber, Edmund Husserl argues that "philosophical and ideological positivism" had turned humanity away from "the specifically human questions" of existence.[18] Like Weber, Husserl was critical of the modern desire to seek the same certitude of the sciences in all aspects of human being. Some parts of the human experience cannot be known in that fashion. Although Camus felt that his era was ripe for a rebirth of tragedy, the forces of rationalism and positivism were too powerful, and the need to explore the mysteries of the human heart, perhaps too harrowing. The certainty expected from reason and empiricism is not available in the world of meaning. Indeed, that world is absurd.

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[16] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *Daedalus* 87, no. 1 (1958): 117.

[17] Ibid, 117, 121.

[18] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy,* trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 7.

Of course, *The Rebel* shows Camus was keenly aware of this trend towards positivism and the dangerous implications of trying to bring the certainty of science into the realm of value judgments. Camus's theater, although it may fail to live up to his standards for tragedy, still provides us with a vision of the "tragic man" who can authentically live with the ambiguities of human existence, just like the Greeks so many years ago.

Camus's Search for Tragedy

A close examination of Camus's original plays and adaptations leads me to conclude that his original works and adaptations fail to live up to the grandeur of the classic tragedies he so admired. Of course, living up to these classics is a large task for any writer, even someone as talented as Albert Camus.

Haskell M. Block makes the argument that "violence and suffering do not in themselves constitute tragedy."[19] This statement captures why Camus's dramas fail to succeed as tragedies; they are plenty violent, but for a myriad of reasons it can be difficult to appreciate the tragedy of his characters.

One difficulty that Camus struggled with was the language of tragedy. When discussing *The Misunderstanding* he noted the difficulty in capturing the tragic tone in a modern work: "Nothing, indeed, is more difficult, since a language must be found that is natural enough to be spoken by contemporaries and yet sufficiently unusual to suggest the tragic tone. In an effort to approach that ideal I tried to give aloofness to the characters and ambiguity to the dialogues."[20] The characters are often too aloof and the dialogues too ambiguous to provide the tragic tone

[19] Haskell M. Block, "Albert Camus: Toward a Definition of Tragedy," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1950): 354.

[20] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays,* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1962), vii-viii.

Camus was seeking. If the audience cannot relate to a character in a tragedy, then it is difficult for them to invest in the action.

This failure of language in Camus's plays is also reflected in his propensity to have his characters give lengthy, philosophic speeches. Brée notes: "To Camus, dialogue is not an explanation of action; it cannot be divorced from action and yet it is not a comment on it. To understand the dialogue the spectator must first grasp the play in its totality and then follow an intellectual path as Camus designates it."[21] Although a study such as mine benefits from being able to analyze philosophic speeches by reading the plays, an audience watching them may struggle to follow the dialogue, leading them to miss whatever potential lessons Camus is trying to convey.

In addition, all of Camus's plays, with the exception of *State of Siege*, are missing a key structural element of Greek tragedy, the chorus. The only other play that comes close to having something resembling a chorus is *Caligula*. In *Caligula*, Camus joins the patricians into one group to repeat Caesonia's words of adoration for Caligula while he is dressed as Venus: "Make known to us the truth about this world – which is that it has none…"[22] It is interesting that someone so attached to the form of Greek tragedy would produce dramas without this key element. The presence of a chorus in his plays would have allowed for Camus to explain the action to the audience, interpret the long speeches, and give to the audience the voice of moderation. Having a collective group explain the mistakes of the characters on stage would have helped situate the individual struggles within the context of a larger community, in other words, highlighted the importance of limits in rebellion against the absurd. In the absence of the

[21] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 178.

[22] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 40.

chorus and with extraordinary demands placed upon the audience the difficulty of tragic language is magnified and the quality of the tragic drama compromised.

Christine Margerrison is critical of the inaccessibility of Camus's plays, arguing that in her view: "Camus declines a dialogue with his audience, denying them sufficient information to participate actively in the interpretative process. This stands in sharp contrast to the tragedies of Aeschylus, where we understand the motives of characters and empathise with their plight; above all, they have personalities and histories which lend their behaviour internal coherence."[23] Margerrison's criticism, while fair, raises an important question for the hope of a revival of the tragic form in modernity, the lack of familiar characters. Brée's discussion of Camus's attempt to recreate tragedy notes that his attempt to "create tragedy in modern dress" involved doing so "unsupported by the great tragic figures of the past, the Antigones, Orestes, or even, as he himself noted later, the Caligulas."[24]

Although I think that Camus's attempt to recreate a modern tragedy ultimately failed, I still believe his dramatic output is worthy of consideration as a literature of moral deliberation. Camus believed that one task of the modern tragedy was "to create new sacred images." This would come from the search for a "synthesis between liberty and necessity" that would "keep alive our power of revolt without yielding to our power of negation."[25] These new sacred images would have to symbolize an example of humanity that was fully aware of its condition in the world and the joys and sorrows of that experience, as well as the limits necessarily attendant to

[23] Christine Margerrison, "Camus and the Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, 75.

[24] Brée, *Camus*, 146.

[25] Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays,* 308, 309.

it. Despite all their shortcomings, Camus's dramas do provide us with new sacred images or symbols.

The Artist and Symbols

In spite of his lack of attention to tragic conventions in his own plays, Camus was an intentional artist. Early in this dissertation, I noted Camus believed the artist had an important role to play in society. For Camus, artists should strive to help assist their societies to better understand the human condition by producing works that maintain "an equilibrium between reality and man's rejection of that reality."[26] Doing that requires an understanding of the role symbols play in the artistic journey and how they help us discover new sacred images.

As noted above, Camus was critical of an overreliance on reason to explain the world. For Camus, it was important that humanity learn to accept the mysteries of human existence. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* he explains that the absurd is not in the world but in the confrontation of the human longing for clarity and an unreasonable world that cannot offer that clarity. "This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."[27]

In my chapter on absurdity, I pointed out how this longing for clarity can lead to philosophical or religious systems of certainty, which in Camus's perspective were inauthentic responses to the absurd. Authentic positions toward the absurd recognize the limits of reason and faith. "To impoverish that reality whose inhumanity constitutes man's majesty is tantamount to impoverishing him himself. I understand then why doctrines that explain everything to me

[26] Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 265.

[27] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 21.

also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone."[28]

Of course, Camus recognizes that the weight of existence can be heavy. He concludes that art is a means to help humanity continually confront the absurd in an authentic fashion. Art is useful in helping explore human being because it helps fulfill a need for unity. Since a work of art, specifically a novel or play, can portray any potential outcome, it allows an exploration of possibilities and outcomes that cannot be achieved in the real world. "Man is finally able to give himself the alleviating form and limits which he pursues in vain in his own life."[29] Eubanks and Petrakis note that this unity shows the significance of art: "It satisfies a metaphysical need, but it does so without changing (or claiming to change) concrete conditions." Obviously, art does not change the world or the absurd, but it allows for some coherence to be glimpsed and "satisfies a yearning for unity without compromising the confrontation with the absurd."[30]

Eubanks and Petrakis argue that Camus "prefers images and symbols over philosophy and rationality because they are better able to represent or articulate human experiences."[31] As my dissertation has shown, Camus was particularly fond of mythical heroes to illuminate the human experience. "[M]yths have no life of their own. They wait for us to give them flesh."[32] Camus hoped that by recounting the myths of Sisyphus, Prometheus, and Nemesis for modern audiences he might assist us in explaining how to maintain an authentic stance towards the

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[28] Ibid., 55.

[29] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 264.

[30] Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, "Exile, Judgment, and Kingdom: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience," 31, 32.

[31] Ibid., 32.

[32] Albert Camus, "Prometheus in the Underworld," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 141.

absurd. In each of the three cycles of production I have discussed, Camus's plays provide us with images representative of the themes of absurdity, rebellion, and judgment. As he does so, Camus provides us with a new sacred image to help guide judgment in an absurd world, namely the sophrosyne.

From Classic Images to a New Sacred Image

Before elaborating on the new sacred image of sophrosyne, it is useful to review the classic symbols Camus invoked throughout his cycles and explore how the plays illuminate our understanding of what each of those symbols represent. It is through this process that we may gain an understanding of the new sacred image of sophrosyne. In each cycle of his production Camus invoked classical myths to help affix his audience's attention on the important aspects of that cycle: Sisyphus exemplifies Camus's notion of an authentic confrontation with the absurd, Prometheus serves as the guide for authentic rebellion, and Nemesis serves as a reminder that moderation in judgment is needed to maintain authentic rebellion against the absurd.

After discussing the intellectual malady of absurdity and exploring inauthentic responses to its revelation, Camus closes *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a reimagining of the classical myth. Camus wants us to imagine Sisyphus as happy with his eternity of futile labor because Sisyphus has learned to embrace his limited fate. He is alive to experience it. Camus uses Sisyphus to show that "The present and the succession of presents before a constantly conscious soul is the ideal of the absurd man."[33]

Camus uses Sisyphus to represent an authentic orientation to the absurd, lucidity in the face of an ultimate fate (death) from which there is no escape. The gods had believed that Sisyphus being aware that his life was to be filled with futile labor would serve as punishment,

[33] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 63-64.

but in learning to embrace this struggle, Sisyphus overcomes his punishment. "The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory."[34]

Camus's most famous work in his absurd cycle, *The Stranger*, depicts a man who is the opposite of Sisyphus. Meursault is an example of someone who never engages in thought or consideration of his being outside of basic human functions. Meursault's refusal to reflect on his existence ends up causing him to become complicit in a revenge scheme that eventually leads him to murder the Arab man.

The two plays of the absurd cycle feature characters who are fully conscious of humanity's absurd condition and draw the wrong conclusions from this revelation. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus notes that "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."[35] Of course, he is referring to the manner in which Sisyphus is able to scorn the gods and their punishment by embracing his limited fate. Both Caligula and Martha are guilty of carrying their scorn of the human condition too far, leading them to become partners with death.

Caligula's response to the absurd discovery is to use the absence of ultimate meaning in the world to allow himself absolute freedom to construct his own meaning. His answer to the absurdity of the world is to use his power to attempt the impossible, that is to change the nature of reality by dealing directly with death. Caligula decides that instead of letting fate determine when people died, he will be the one to do so, terrorizing Rome through forced famines and randomized executions. Of course, this belief that he can possess the same power over life and death as the gods leads Caligula to turn the people of Rome against himself. In the end he

[34] Ibid., 121.

[35] Ibid.

embarks on a journey of metaphysical rebellion that isolates him from any chances at love and fellowship that could have helped him cope with the death of his sister.

The Misunderstanding, like *Caligula*, portrays that same failure to find an authentic stance to the absurd and similarly leads to death and suffering. Martha and her mother recognize the absurdity of the human condition and take the inevitability of death, and the precarious nature in which it arrives, to justify murder. The women justify their killings by convincing themselves that murdering their visitors in their sleep is a more peaceful death than most of the men could have expected. Although they do not commit murder on the same scale as Caligula, the women still use the inevitability of death and suffering to justify an unlimited freedom to alleviate their own suffering.

By the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus has argued that although life may have no apparent meaning, it does have value. In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus only elaborates that suicide is an inappropriate response to the absurd, but he does note that the absurd situation does not liberate one to do whatever one pleases; it binds a person to living and acting in the world, not trying to transform it or hope for another one. He will elaborate on this idea in his cycle on revolt.

Camus opens *The Rebel* by elaborating on the point he made in his plays, an authentic revolt against the absurd does not allow someone to murder others. "[H]uman life is the only necessary good since it is precisely life that makes [the absurd] encounter possible." From this reasoning, it follows that "From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men."[36] Camus chose Prometheus as his symbol of a proper revolt against the absurd condition.

[36] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 6, 6.

In Camus's view, Prometheus's rebellion against the gods was limited to the alleviation of suffering caused by Zeus. He notes that Prometheus's rebellion was "a question of settling a particular account, of a dispute about what is good, and not of a universal struggle between good and evil."[37] Prometheus is used to show that revolt against the absurd should be undertaken in the name of life. This revolt must be limited in ways that respect the good (human life) that lies at the heart of revolt. The two plays of Camus's revolt cycle, *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*, do, in fact, imagine characters who undertake rebellion in the name of life, and in the recognition of a need for limits.

In *State of Siege*, the young doctor Diego is a character who refuses to cross the limits that Caligula and Martha ignored. Diego's revolt originates out of his love for life and his fiancée, Victoria. At several points in the play, Diego recognizes the importance of life and the need to refuse to add to the suffering in the world. He refuses to infect an innocent young man with the plague because he realizes his cause loses its righteousness if it causes an innocent person to suffer. Diego also refuses to allow the new regime to keep his fellow citizens under their control, even though it means he must sacrifice his own life. Diego was unable to justify his own existence at the expense of the continued suffering of his city. So he gave up his life in exchange for the freedom of his city and Victoria's life. This nicely captures something of the mode of authentic rebellion that Camus advocated.

The second play in the revolt cycle is *The Just Assassins*. Like *State of Siege*, the play continues exploring the limits of revolt, this time analyzing the limits of political revolt. A key conflict in the play revolves around the question of whether innocent lives can be taken to achieve a "just" cause. One young man, Kaliayev, wants to revolt in the name of life, while an

[37] Ibid., 27.

older man, Stepan, wants to revolt in the name of justice. Although these two notions may appear to be the same, Camus makes clear in *The Rebel* that authentic rebellion is undertaken in the name of life and the dignity of all humans. Justice is too much the abstraction to deal in such particulars.

The play continues the exploration of limits as the terrorists in the group end up siding with Kaliayev over Stepan. The group believes that to take the lives of innocents in the name of their cause deprives their revolt of its righteousness. The group's goal is to free Russia from an oppressive regime and to cause suffering to innocents would make them no better than the regime itself. Kaliayev notes: "I refuse to add to the living injustice all around me for the sake of a dead justice."[38] Kaliayev, like Diego, ends up giving his own life in the name of his cause. Like Prometheus, Kaliayev and Diego each rebel to settle a particular count of injustice, not the entirety of existence, something that neither Caligula nor Martha are able to understand.

Camus chose the Greek goddess Nemesis as the representative for his cycle on judgment. As noted in chapter 4, Camus never produced an essay on Nemesis like he had for Sisyphus and Prometheus, but some of his existing works do help explain his understanding of the goddess. In his notebooks Camus associated Nemesis with "measure," arguing that "All those who have overstepped the limit will be pitilessly destroyed."[39] In the essay "Helen's Exile" Camus argues that Nemesis is the "goddess of moderation, not vengeance."[40] The plays in Camus's final cycle contain characters who are anything but measured. In many ways, Camus continues the examination of the extreme metaphysical rebellion that a lack of measuredness illustrates.

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[38] Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, 260.

[39] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, 156, 267.

[40] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 149.

The first play of the cycle, *Requiem for a Nun*, revolves around the horror of infanticide. Nancy Mannigoe murders an innocent child out of the mistaken belief that she was sparing the child from future suffering. Camus uses Nancy to display the danger of clinging to false hopes of redemption in another life and how they may be used to justify horrific actions in the present life.

Throughout *Requiem for a Nun*, we also see the pain that being unable to forgive can cause. The father of the murdered child, Gowan Stevens, is unable to forgive his wife for poor decisions in her past and lacks the ability to recognize that he, too, needs to be forgiven for his mistakes. This prideful attitude contributes to his wife Temple's desire to abandon her son and husband, to run away with a criminal, and, thereby, to lead Nancy to the murder of the child. Camus's adaptation of *Requiem for a Nun* hints at the potential positive, as well as negative possibilities of love in an absurd world.

The final play Camus produced was his adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed*. The play helps inform our understanding of Camus's thoughts on judgment by highlighting characters so consumed by nihilism that they have lost the ability to appropriately judge moral actions. Camus noted he was fond of the novel because it foreshadowed the nihilism present in his day, as well as featured people who were unable to love, and, as a consequence, were incapable of nurturing any value, particularly the value of life.

The play focuses on several young men who are nihilists and shows the way their interpretation of the meaninglessness of the world impacts their ability to distinguish between actions worthy of pursuit and actions to be avoided. The young engineer Kirilov is so convinced of the world's meaninglessness that he plans to kill himself to illustrate humanity's freedom from God or traditional morals. In his obsession with nihilism and his quest to be a liberator of

mankind, Kirilov forgets that any rebellion undertaken against the absurdity of the world should be done in the name of life. Not only does his suicide negate the value of his own life, he allows himself to confess to a murder he never committed, and to allow a group of revolutionairies to murder his roommate, Shatov.

The play's protagonist, Nicholas Stavrogin, makes the mistake of accepting nihilism as the answer to an absurd world. He believes that since there is no known right or wrong in the world, everything is meaningless. His mistake in judgment is in failing to recognize the absurdity of existence as a starting point, not an end in itself. Nicholas dedicates himself to being indifferent and does not consider any action as being good or bad, allowing himself to indulge in behaviors with no regard for their moral value or significance. He allows himself to be indifferent to the consequences of his actions and the suffering they cause others.

Camus uses the plays in his cycles to illuminate the importance of moral decision making in human life. He used the Greek figures of Sisyphus, Prometheus, and Nemesis to provide his audience with exemplars of authentic behavior in each of his cycles. In each cycle he uses his dramatic art to show some characters who are worthy of emulation and some whose behavior should be avoided. His work displays a progression from the human encounter with the absurd, to revolt against death and the absurd, to a need for authentic judgment in navigating the limits of the revolt against death and absurdity. Each of the plays in Camus's cycles of production fit with the theme of their particular stage, but collectively, they also illuminate this new sacred image that teaches us the importance of soundness of mind which I shall call sophrosyne.

Sophrosyne

Throughout my study, I have made clear that Camus was fond of the Greeks and their balanced approach to life. For him the Greeks "gave everything its share, balancing light with shade."[41] As mentioned above, one of the principal ways that the Greeks highlighted this necessary balance was through their dramatic art. The theater was an important part of Greek life and Camus appreciated its importance. He believed the theater was "a place where each spectator has 'a rendez-vous with himself', where he can experience a self-definition occasioned by the soliloquies of 'those large figures who cry out on the stage.'"[42] While his own theater may have fallen short of his ideal of tragedy, it still allows readers to experience a rendezvous with themselves and helps them understand the need to respect limits to action by highlighting a middle path to human action known as the sophrosyne.

Helen North writes that the concept of sophrosyne has evolved, "from its earliest appearance in the Homeric poems to its transformation into a Christian virtue in the fourth century of our era." Interestingly, North notes that it remains a mystery why sophrosyne emerged "as a primary virtue among the Greeks and not among other ancient peoples" with comparable backgrounds.[43] F.E. Peters defines sophrosyne as "self-control" or "moderation." Peters notes that the concept "is the subject of one of Socrates' ethical enquiries, as described in the *Charmides*, where no solid definition is reached." Plato's "Cratylus" provides an etymological meaning of "moral sanity." Overall, for Plato, the concept is closely linked to the tripartite soul with sophrosyne being "the harmonious subjection of the two lower parts to the

[41] Albert Camus, *"Helen's Exile,"* 149.

[42] Rima Drell Reck, "The Theater of Albert Camus," *Modern Drama 4,* no. 4 (1961), 43.

[43] Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), vii, viii.

ruling, the rational part."[44] Plato likens the rational part to a charioteer who is working to maintain control of his chariot (the soul) which is being pulled by two horses, one that represents the spirited part of the soul and the other that represents the appetitive part of the soul. Someone who possesses the quality of sophrosyne would have their soul in order with the rational part maintaining control of the other two.

Peters argues that for Aristotle, "*sophrosyne* is the mean (*meson*) between the extremes of pleasures and pains."[45] In their translation of *Nichomachean Ethics*, Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins define sophrosyne as "Moderation."[46] Ostwald adds to this this definition, noting that the word "Literally translated, means 'soundness of mind,' and describes the full knowledge of one's limitations in a positive as well as negative sense." He goes on to argue that "'moderation,' too, has largely negative connotations and has, in addition, a flabbiness that is alien to the Greek term."[47]

According to Peters, "Zeno, like Plato, makes *sophrosyne* one of the four chief virtues." He notes that the Stoics defined the term as "'the knowledge of the good to be chosen and the evil to be avoided.'" Peters argues that Plotinus had a definition of the term similar to the Stoics, "but relates it to a purification preparatory to the 'return.'"[48] Plotinus's conception of the term is particularly interesting because Camus had studied him and written about him in his thesis,

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[44] F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 179, 179, 179, 179.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 319.

[47] Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999), 314.

[48] F. E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, 180, 180, 180.

Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism. Plotinus says: "[W]e should seek to discover that which is beautiful and good and the ugly and evil. And first we should posit Beauty, which is the Good from which Intellect comes, which is itself identical with Beauty. And Soul is beautiful by Intellect. Other things are beautiful as soon as they are shaped by Soul, including examples of beauty in actions and in practices."[49] Plotinus's words capture the relationship between limits in human action and beauty.

Camus's plays provide us with a new sacred image in the form of sophrosyne because they highlight the importance of human judgment in an absurd world. This judgment consists of the soundness of mind to know the good to be chosen and the evil to be avoided, in other words, the limits of human action in an absurd world. The best understanding of Camus's notion of sophrosyne comes from a look at his theater as a collective. Although this is true, his final play before his death, *The Possessed*, does provide a glimpse of a character who closely embodies sophrosyne, Shatov.

Shatov acknowledges the absurdity of the world, but instead of despairing before it he recognizes it as the shared condition of all of humanity and refuses to use it as an excuse to ignore moral behavior. Shatov possesses the good judgment to live only with what he knows, recognizing that he has people he loves and cares about around him which allows him to "believe and build" while "others destroy."[50]

When discussing Camus's search for modern tragedy Brée raises important questions: "What, in a modern context, is the real core of tragic experience in our time? What form does our *hubris* take and what is the nature of the antagonistic forces which tear our humanity

[49] Plotinus, *Plotinus, The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 99.

[50] Albert Camus, *The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts,* 81-82.

apart?"[51] The answer to both questions is judgment. Humankind cares about its being and searches for a sense of purpose or signification. Unfortunately, this search is met by a world that is indifferent and silent. The inability to obtain ultimate answers to human existence is taken by some as a signal that nothing in the world has meaning. Camus's plays have shown the tragedy that stems from the mistaken judgment that humanity can find ultimate answers or that there is nothing meaningful in human existence. Camus's theater shows that good judgment is essential to avoiding tragedy through the hubris of believing one has all of the answers.

Camus's plays deserve consideration because they all, regardless of the stage of production, force us to consider the role that judgment plays in our lives. In order to display good judgment in an absurd world one must possess the soundness of mind to know the good to be chosen and the evil to be avoided. Camus helps show the path toward moral clarity through his plays and the symbols he uses for each cycle.

At its core, Camus's notion of sophrosyne features a lucid awareness of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus notes: "I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it […] I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me – that is what I understand."[52] With this statement Camus is highlighting the need for lucid revolt for life in the immediacy of the present. Sisyphus is able to obtain happiness in accepting the reality of his condition and finding joy in pushing his rock. Caligula and Martha both undertake revolt against absurdity, but their revolt is not limited to the underworld like Sisyphus. The two plays

[51] Germaine Brée, *Camus*, 147-148.

[52] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 51.

of the absurd cycle show that lucid awareness of absurdity and revolt against it are not the only important aspects of moral clarity.

With his stage on revolt Camus shows that revolt against death in the name of life is important, but this rebellion loses its authenticity when it fails to recognize limits. In *The Rebel*, Camus notes that a rebel is someone who "says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation."[53] The authentic rebel says no to mistreatment but does not say no to living life on this Earth. Caligula and Martha both displayed a revolt that countered the value of human life. With the plays of the second stage Camus wants to remind us of the original rebel, Prometheus, who rebelled to improve the condition of humanity. The plays in the revolt stage provide positive examples of rebellion; rebellions undertaken in the name of life to improve the condition of human beings, not to change all of creation. When these rebels make a life and death decision, they do so after much deliberation and often at the expense of their own life.

Camus's final cycle on judgment illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a lucid awareness of humanity's absurd condition while rebelling against it in an authentic way. Camus used Nemesis as the guide for moderation or proportionality in human action. The plays in the judgment cycle feature little moderation or proportionality. The plays in Camus's final stage are filled with ugly things, but through this ugliness Camus reveals the importance of good judgment and the relationship between good judgment and beauty. In "Helen's Exile" Camus is critical of the human impulse towards the absolute: "[We] seek to transfigure the world before having exhausted it, to set it to rights before having understood it. Whatever we may say, we are turning our backs on this world."[54] Nancy and Stavrogin fail to understand the fragility of human being in the world, leading them to commit unspeakable acts.

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[53] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt,*

The characters of Camus's dramas allow his audience to have a rendezvous with themselves and question the way they engage the world and those they share it with. One who possesses the moral clarity of sophrosyne will engage the world in an authentic way, fully embracing the limited human capacity to understand and change the world. This person will recognize the absurdity of human existence, but will use this to orient themself to acting in this world and without hope for another. This action will be considered and recognize the importance of alleviating suffering and injustice in the world. The desire to alleviate suffering and injustice will be aware that the human capacity to change the world is limited and one cannot give in to a desire to perfect human existence.

Concluding Thoughts

North provides the interesting observation that one of the earliest uses of the phrase sophrosyne "makes it clear that sophrosyne is not a 'heroic' virtue, since the two greatest fighting men of the Homeric epic, Achilles and Ajax, are the very ones who most notoriously lack this quality. It is no coincidence that these are the two whom Aristotle cites […] as exemplars of *megalopsychia* ('high-mindedness')." North contrasts the high-minded with the sophron, "the man of restraint."[55] This observation helps deepen our understanding of Camus's sophrosyne. In "Helen's Exile" he reminds us that a problem with the modern age is "we simply lack the pride of the man who is faithful to his limitations – that is the clairvoyant love of his human condition."[56]

[54] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 152.

[55] Helen North, *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature,* 2.

[56] Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, 152.

Camus reimagined the myth of Sisyphus to encourage lucid awareness of the human condition. Recognition of the absurd does not mean despair, it simply means we are on our own and must take responsibility for our actions. "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men."[57] His interpretation of the story of Prometheus awakened us to the power of revolt in the name of life and human dignity. Camus uses Prometheus's rebellion against the injustice of the gods to remind us "to invent fire once more, to settle down once again to the job of appeasing the body's hunger."[58] Finally, Camus uses the goddess Nemesis to remind us that forgetting the limits of rebellion and causing injustice brings punishment. Nemesis is "the goddess of measure" and she is watching to ensure "All those who have overstepped the limit will be pitilessly destroyed."[59]

Camus's theatrical output can be viewed as a journey that helps showcase the importance of soundness of mind in confronting the absurd and ensuring that one does not engage in too much or too little to revolt against it. The struggle of Camus's dramatic characters to find their place and meaning in this world helps to highlight "the only original rule of life today" which is "to learn to live and to die, and, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god."[60]

This is, of course, easier said than done. Since humans care about their being they will seek meaning to their existence. The danger comes from refusing to learn to live with the uncertainties that come from living and revolting in an absurd universe. Camus's theater can be seen as an exploration of the dangers of refusing to accept the limitations of human knowledge and action. To cross the limit not only risks harming oneself, but endangering others. In

[57] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 122.

[58] Albert Camus, "Prometheus in the Underworld," 140.

[59] Albert Camus, *Notebooks: 1942-1951*, 156.

[60] Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 306.

“Helen’s Exile” Camus notes that modern society had turned its back on beauty, favoring excess. For him true beauty came in full acceptance of the human condition, a condition that came with no guarantee of meaning, but the potential to live a meaningful life in community with others.

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