Chapter-IV

INFLUENCE OF MORAL SURROUNDINGS ON HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

In this chapter, a thorough examination of Camus’ message from the beginning of his career to its end is undertaken. The analysis also demonstrates the incredible difficulty of establishing an ethical system grounded in the absurd.

I begin with a look at Camus’ absurdist phase, the period of time before he really begins to defend certain values. This will encompass *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *Caligula*. The next section will deal with Camus’ transition from absurdist to moralist, which includes *The Rebel, and The Plague*. These two sections focus on the common threads running through each work, and I discuss for each of them the influence of Christianity as well as its treatment, the role of absurdity, and the values Camus is proposing or defending. By contrasting the positions Camus takes in *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* to the sentiments expressed in his final novel, *The Fall*, I highlight the difficulties of reconciling morality and the absurd.
• **Myth of Sisyphus**

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide”. This bold and striking assertion is how Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his essay on the absurd and its implications for human life. Immediately, one might object that there are more serious philosophical problems than that of suicide. While this issue is certainly important, Camus might first consider the epistemological question of whether we can actually know whether life is worth living. Camus, however, is not actually considering the problem of suicide in general. In considering this question alone, it is easy to see how one might come to the conclusion that life’s absurdity does indeed render it pointless. For instance, a person raised as a Christian is taught that life’s purpose is to accept Christ and earn one’s place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Camus recognizes this problem and intends to give it serious treatment:

Hitherto, and it has not been wasted effort, people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgments….One kills oneself because life is not worth living that is certainly a truth—yet an unfruitful one because it is a truism. But does that insult to existence, that flat denial in which it is plunged come from the fact that it has no meaning? Does its absurdity require one to escape it through hope or suicide — this is what must be clarified, hunted down, and elucidated while brushing aside all the rest. Does the Absurd dictate death? This problem must be given priority over others, outside all methods of thought and all exercises of the disinterested mind.  

While the issue of Christianity is never directly addressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is nevertheless an important aspect of the confrontation with the absurd. For centuries, Europeans lived their lives while taking the doctrines of
the Christian faith more or less for granted. But as the influence of science and reason grew, these doctrines were brought into question. It became harder and harder to accept claims such as the Immaculate Conception or the Resurrection because these miracles stood in direct contradiction to what we know to be scientifically possible. More and more people came to the conclusion that Jesus could not have been anything more than a man, as mortal as all other men. And if Jesus himself had not been resurrected, there was no longer any hope of man’s resurrection.

Camus recognizes the significance of this loss of faith for humanity. The issues that Christianity professes to resolve are the issues that Camus himself is most concerned with. “As a philosophical thinker, he was preoccupied with questions about the place of humanity in the universe, the meaning of human life, reasons for living, and morality questions central to all religions, including Christianity”. The notion of the absurd appears in every one of Camus’ works, but nowhere does he spend as much time defining and clarifying the term than in the first section of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, entitled “An Absurd Reasoning”. Man’s confrontation with the absurd is almost inevitable.

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising streetcars, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.

It is this “why” that presents the problem. If we cannot accept the answers that religion provides, we find ourselves with only questions. And so absurdity arises as a confrontation between man and the world. “In this particular case and
on the plane of intelligence, I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man…nor in the world, but in their presence together”.

There is nothing inherently absurd about the mind or the world when considered separately, but putting them together results in a torrent of confusion and contradiction. It is one of the oldest and most difficult philosophical problems—how to reconcile conscious experience with the world of conscious experience. Camus makes no attempt to solve this problem, but declares that we must accept it as insoluble and take it from there.

And it is by this elementary criterion that I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential and consider that it can stand as the first of my truths. The rule of method alluded to above appears here. If I judge that a thing is true, I must preserve it. If I attempt to solve a problem, at least I must not by that very solution conjure away one of the terms of the problem. For me the sole datum is the absurd. The first and, after all, the only condition of my inquiry is to preserve the very thing that crushes me, consequently to respect what I consider essential in it. I have just defined it as a confrontation and an unceasing struggle.

Camus makes it clear that his intention is not to reject the absurd as a false conclusion but to accept it as a first premise and draw conclusions based upon it. And the absurd, according to Camus, is the confrontation between what man thinks the world should be and what it actually is. Camus must only show that this confrontation need not result in despair. If a man can accept the absurd and still find satisfaction in life, then Camus’ conclusion is correct and the absurd does not lead to suicide. Camus clarifies that he is not discussing freedom in the sense of the debate over whether man’s actions are free or predetermined, but merely in terms of our freedom.
The only conception of freedom I can have is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the State. The only one I know is freedom of thought and action. Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man's availability.  

So there is a downside: man can appreciate that he can choose, but he must also face the anguish of knowing that he must choose. With his three portraits in “The Absurd Man” Camus begins to give shape to the sort of value he is proposing, and in his next section, “Absurd Creation,” he gives it a name and a description:

In that daily effort in which intelligence and passion mingle and delight each other, the absurd man discovers a discipline that will make up the greatest of his strengths. The required diligence, the doggedness and lucidity thus resemble the conqueror’s attitude. To create is likewise to give a shape to one’s fate. For all these characters, their work defines them at least as much as it is defined by them.  

The final section of the essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus” provides us with a powerful illustration of this message. Camus chooses the Greek hero Sisyphus as his icon—an appropriate selection due to Camus’ pagan sentiments. In the version of the myth that Camus describes, Sisyphus obtains permission from Pluto to temporarily leave the underworld, but loves earthly life so much that in defiance of the gods, he refuses to return. His punishment is to spend eternity rolling a rock up a mountain.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.
The story of Sisyphus is tragic because its hero is conscious of his fate. He knows that every time his rock reaches the summit it will roll back down and he will be forced to repeat the task again. It is this moment that Camus draws our attention to, the moment when Sisyphus turns to begin his descent down the mountain. This moment captures the essence of Camus’ meaning.

That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.  

In spite of the absurdity and cruelty of his fate, Sisyphus continues to endure; continuously pushing the rock up the mountain with full knowledge that it will only come crashing down again. And it may be that none of our actions has any deeper meaning or enduring significance.

- **Caligula**

The idea of finding value in the face of absurdity is an ever-present theme in nearly all of Camus’ work, including his 1938 play, *Caligula*. In this four-act drama, the infamous Roman Emperor *Caligula* becomes the embodiment of the absurd. After the death of his sister and lover Drusilla, *Caligula* becomes obsessed with the idea of the impossible. He comes to believe in one essential truth: “Men die; and they are not happy.”  

This truth, which he sees as a conclusion of pure and simple logic, is something of which his subjects must be educated. To do this, *Caligula* decrees that all Roman citizens must disinherit their children, leave all their money to the State, and be executed. He orders a list to be drawn up fixing the order of their deaths, to be modified at his fancy.
In this way he will demonstrate the cruelty of life and the immanence of death, which can only be remedied if the impossible becomes possible. Before examining the philosophical import of this play, it should be noted that Camus himself did not intend for the play to be read philosophically. In his introduction to a book compiling his dramatic work, Camus remarks that it was not his intention to advance any philosophical position.

I look in vain for philosophy in these four acts. Or, if it exists, it stands on the level of this assertion by the hero: ‘Men die; and they are not happy.’ A very modest ideology, as you see, which I have the impression of sharing with Everyman. No, my ambition lay elsewhere. For the dramatist the passion for the impossible is just as valid a subject for study as avarice of adultery. Showing it in all its frenzy, illustrating the havoc it wreaks, bringing out its failure—such was my intention. And the work must be judged thereon. 

Yet although Camus did not intend Caligula to be judged on these grounds, its themes are philosophical enough to warrant such analysis. Many early Christians of the Gnostic sects believed that the God of the Old Testament is a different God than that spoken of by Christ. The God of Israel is merely the God of this Earth, his influence limited to the world of mankind. The God of the New Testament, however, is of a much higher order—this is the creator of all things, the Heavenly Father that Jesus refers to in his sermons. Caligula could represent the God of the Old Testament, his obsession with the impossible and expression of the frustration of this intermediate God, so close to Absolute Power but still hopelessly limited. While the superior God creates and destroys all things including the inferior God himself, the latter God can do little more than influence or destroy. Caligula exercises the greatest power he has the power to
kill. In the play’s final act, *Caligula* turns his murderous gaze towards his own wife, Caesonia, and reveals his inner motivations:

> I live, I kill, and I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer, compared with which the power of a creator is merest child’s play. And this, this is happiness; this and nothing else—this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around me; the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the ineffable joy of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives…that’s crushing yours out, Caesonia, so as to perfect at last the utter loneliness that is my heart’s desire.\(^{12}\)

*Caligula*’s assertion that men die and are not happy is an expression of the darker side of the absurd. “Men die” expresses the idea that nothing has importance because eventually death will render all our efforts fruitless. That men “are not happy” may be seen as an exaggeration when taken literally—usually men are happy sometimes and unhappy others but it really means that human happiness is fragile and temporary. Human being may want to say that someone living a good life filled with love and wealth is happy, but even this person must eventually grow old and die. And in a life characterized by absurdity, this idea could be enough to lead anyone to despair.

For the character of Cherea, the idea is terrible enough to motivate a fierce struggle against it. For the patricians it is bad enough that they stand in line to be executed, but Cherea joins in their plot to assassinate *Caligula* for ideological reasons:

> Our deaths are only a side issue. He’s putting his power at the service of a loftier, deadlier passion; and it imperils everything we hold most sacred. True, it’s not the first time Rome has seen a man wielding unlimited power; but it’s the first time he sets no limit to his use of it, and counts mankind, and the world we know, for nothing. That’s what appeals me in *Caligula*; that’s what I want to fight. To lose one’s life is no great matter; when the time comes I’ll have the courage to lose mine. But what’s intolerable is...
to see one’s life being drained of meaning, to be told there’s no reason for existing. A man can’t live without some reason for living.\textsuperscript{13}

Cherea is less concerned with death than with the horror of a meaningless life. *Caligula’s* actions are detestable not merely because he kills, but because he kills without reason. Cherea knows that people die without reason all the time, but believes that life is absurd enough without *Caligula* adding to it. Cherea’s sentiment is one of the central messages that can be found in *Caligula*. At the end of the third act, Cherea is confronted by *Caligula*, who knows that he is involved in the plot to kill him and wants to know the reasons why. Cherea explains:

> Because what I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions. As you see, I’m quite an ordinary sort of man. True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I’d kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board. And these, I repeat, are the things that count, for me.\textsuperscript{14}

*Caligula* believes that what he is doing is perfectly logical, and that Cherea as a man of intelligence ought to see that. But Cherea rejects *Caligula’s* logic in favour of emotion. His own happiness is important to him, and absurdity threatens that happiness. This is exactly the view put forward in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. *Caligula*, like the gods in the Greek myth, drains life of meaning while Cherea, like Sisyphus, accepts this and chooses to continue anyway, deciding that his happiness is reason enough. The final act has *Caligula* murder his wife
Caesonia in a desperate rage as he realizes the error of his ways. His deepest desires—freedom and the impossible, cannot be reached through the absurd.

Yes, really, it’s quite simple. If I’d had the moon, if love were enough, all might have been different. But where could I quench this thirst? What human heart, what god, would have for me the depth of a great lake? There’s nothing in this world, or in the other, made to my stature. And yet I know, and you, too, know that all I need is for the impossible to be. The impossible! I’ve searched for it at the confines of the world, in the secret places of my heart. I’ve stretched out my hands; see, I stretch out my hands, but it’s always you I find, you only, confronting me, and I’ve come to hate you. I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn’t the right one….Nothing, nothing yet. Oh, how oppressive is this darkness!  

If Caligula contains any moral prescription, it is in avoiding the error made by its hero:

But, if his truth is to rebel against fate, his error lies in negating what binds him to mankind. One cannot destroy everything without destroying oneself. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, faithful to his logic, does what is necessary to arm against him those who will eventually kill him. Caligula is the story of a superior suicide. It is the story of the most human and most tragic of errors. 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.  

One can never be free at another’s expense—the master is just as dependent on his slaves as the slave is dependent on the master. Caligula kills his subjects and is in turn killed by them. In the end, the impossible remains impossible and all are equally victims of the absurd. Camus’ message is once again to accept this absurdity and rather than engage in a fruitless struggle against it by striving to be God, to live with it. Caligula’s is the “wrong freedom” because he attempts to place himself above everything, which can’t be
The “right freedom” is that suggested by Cherea: the freedom to pursue happiness along with our fellow man.

**A Letters to German Friend**

With the start of the Second World War and the German occupation of France, Camus found his absurd world turning upside down. Though uncertain about the nature of good, there was no doubt for Camus that the Nazi regime represented true evil. Defeated and demoralized by the German invaders, France had all but lost its faith in the benevolence of God, and nihilism was spreading like a plague. The need for a strong moral voice had seldom been greater, and Camus took it upon himself to make that voice heard. He knew that his arguments for living without appeal and appreciating earthly life would no longer be enough, and he would now have to tackle one of the toughest problems he would ever face: finding a moral justification to resist oppression without relying on divinity. This task was made all the more difficult due to the circumstances of the time. Speaking out against the Nazi regime was a dangerous business in occupied France, and Camus knew that he would be risking his life. But he managed to find a platform through which he could spread his ideas and yet remain anonymous; when in 1943 he agreed to serve as editor-in-chief of a Resistance newspaper called La Revue Noire, later renamed Combat. The goal of Combat was simply to “fight for our freedoms” and by late 1943, a quarter of a million copies were in circulation. The danger of Camus’ position was made perfectly clear when the printer of Combat, André Bollier,
committed suicide just before he could be arrested by the Germans and forced to reveal the names of his fellow Resistant. In spite of the risks of torture or imprisonment in a concentration camp, Camus managed to anonymously publish a series of four profoundly idealistic and fiercely anti-Nazi letters which would later be republished together and titled, Letters to a German Friend. The difference in tone between these and Camus’ earlier works is striking to say the least, and French readers undoubtedly had no idea that these letters were written by the same young man who had penned The Stranger. The clearest difference would be their complete lack of moral ambiguity. Camus takes a firm position, not bothering to water-down his message with wordy ethical justifications to support his points. Addressing his letters to an imaginary German friend (now an enemy), he writes with a resolute confidence that he wishes to inspire in his fellow countrymen.

The position he advances is clear: the Nazis are in the wrong because they value only the might of their country, while the French have suffered dearly for the very cause which puts them in the right justice. Though it may be an oversimplification on Camus’ part to say that the French defeat at the beginning of the war was due to their need to “overcome our weakness for mankind, the image we had formed of a peaceful destiny”, he remains steadfast in his conviction that the love of truth and justice is why France will inevitably emerge victorious. Whereas Camus’ position toward Christianity in his previous works is clearly adversarial, in Letters to a German Friend his attitude is more ambivalent. Camus wastes no time criticizing doctrine, as it is nihilism and
tyranny that he is up against, rather than what he views as merely misguided faith. Christianity, though he does not accept its claims, is a part of the European tradition, a tradition that Camus wishes to defend. However, he indirectly criticizes the religion due to the ease with which its ideals can be twisted into hypocrisy.

In his second letter, Camus tells the story of eleven French prisoners being carried in a truck from a prison to the cemetery where they are to be shot. Of the eleven, only five or six are guilty, while the rest are “victims of a kind of indifference”. Among the innocent are a young boy, the most terrified of them all. The Germans have provided them with a chaplain, who is meant to alleviate the agony of the hour of waiting, but his words of a future life and the peace to come do nothing to calm the boy’s fears. While the chaplain’s back is turned, the boy tears back the canvas and with hardly a sound jumps out of the truck and begins to run away. But the flapping of the canvas is enough to make the chaplain turn and notice what has happened. Guards are dispatched to chase after the boy, and soon enough he is brought back to await his execution. Camus cites a French priest as the source of this story, who has indicated pride that no French priest would be willing to make his God abet murder. It would seem then that it is not Christianity that he is attacking but the madness of his enemy’s position.

Even men of faith can share in this sort of frustration; that the ideals of non-violence and martyrdom upon which their religion is based can be twisted and abused so as to justify murder. However, that these ideals can be so manipulated is a weakness of Christianity that Camus is not afraid to point out.
And so the criticism Camus levels against Christianity in Letters to a German Friend is an indirect one that its ideals are too abstract to serve as a basis for morality if both victims and executioners can claim to wave its banner.

However, it is not the misinterpretation or manipulation of Christianity that Camus feels is responsible for the atrocities of the Nazi regime; he sees their lust for conquest primarily as a consequence of absurdity. At the beginning of his first letter, Camus describes an imaginary discussion from which both he and his German friend had split paths. Both having recognized the world as essentially absurd, they were forced to find meaning in something beyond religious doctrine, and the conflict began when they chose opposing ideals.

Germans have chosen the might of their country as their reason and purpose for living, whereas the French are more inclined to place their love of justice beside the love of their country. While the Nazis fight using any means to justify what they believe is a worthy end, the French have been defeated because of their belief that certain means can never be justified no matter what the ends. So Absurdity plays the role of the common starting point from which the two nations diverged at the start of the conflict. In the Europe of the 1930s, torn and scarred by the First World War, misery and death were seen as the natural order of things. Darwinism only added to the notion that the only values that could survive in such a cruel and absurd world are the values of strength. Ideals such as justice and peace had no real meaning, as history is only the story of the weak perishing at the hands of the strong. The Nazi ideal of the Master Race would seem to go hand in hand with this “survival of the fittest”
perspective. But the French, and indeed all the Western allies, would demonstrate a reaction against such circumstances. The responsibility lies in bringing justice to a world devoid of it. While murder has been a characteristic of life since life began, justice is a new and strictly human invention. Nevertheless Camus adamantly proclaims that its realization in the world is a task that must be fought for.

Camus lashes out against the Nazi’s stark realism with a fiercely humanistic idealism. If the absurd fate of the world is to be opposed, it is Man alone that stands to oppose it. “Man is that force which ultimately cancels all tyrants and gods.”23 Ironically, both Camus’ position and that of his enemies can be described as “naturalistic.” Once religion has been rejected as a source of values, nature is the next place that many people will look. If God cannot tell us how we ought to live, perhaps we ought to live as nature would suggest. The Nazis looked at nature and saw survival of the fittest as the ultimate value. Camus, on the other hand, looked at human nature and saw the desire for happiness and justice as if not the ultimate value as the value we ought to be fighting for. The ethical claim he makes can be understood in the following way: “Since it is natural for human beings to desire justice and happiness despite the world’s indifference to these desires, human beings ought to band together to fight injustice and create happiness”.24 Camus attributes France’s initial defeat to the long, slow progress her people had in finding their justification. The ideals which Camus expresses early in his career are certainly not of the sort that a nation can stand together and die for. But the lesson Camus and his
countrymen had learned from their defeat is what he insists will secure their eventual victory.

The image which Camus returns to several times throughout his letters, illustrates the most important aspect of the shift between Camus’ absurdist and his moralist phase—the value placed on solidarity, of bravely facing the cruel fate of absurdity (symbolized again through execution) together with one’s fellow man. His attention shifts from the position of the individual within society to the effect of society on the individual, from the question of suicide to the problem of murder.

**THE REBEL**

After the war, the political climate in Europe again underwent a drastic shift, and Camus was compelled to write down his thoughts about the global politics of the time. With the end of World War II, the alliance of France, Britain, and the United States with the Soviet Union dissolved, beginning what would later be called the Cold War. While the United States was building its nuclear arsenal and fighting communism in North Korea, the political situation in France was split between a much wider spectrums of political ideologies. Published in 1951, Camus’ *The Rebel* traces the concept of “man in revolt” through literature and history, offering his own perspective on the ideals of society and where the limits of government control should be. In the opening paragraph, Camus makes his purpose clear:

> There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The boundary between them is not clearly defined. But the Penal Code makes the convenient distinction of premeditation. We are living in the era of
premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges.\textsuperscript{17}

This is to be Camus’ strike against what he sees as one of the world’s greatest evils—rationally justified murder. The criminals he is speaking against are not the kind who takes another’s life in a fit of passion, but for those who systematically murder their enemies for the sake of a higher, ideological purpose. One of Camus’ main targets is communism, his criticism of which would result in the end of his friendship with Sartre and Beauvoir. \textit{The Rebel} is over 300 pages long and divided into five main sections, not all of which deal specifically with communism or even make mention of it. In the introduction Camus gives an overview of the main points he will be making, discussing the failure of his earlier reasoning in \textit{The Myth of Sisyphus}, and how the purpose of this book is to continue that very thought process, turning his attention away from suicide and raising the question of whether rebellion inevitably leads to murder. In the first main section, “The Rebel,” Camus identifies what he considers to be a rebel, what brings rebellion about, and what values arise from rebellion. The next main section is titled, “Metaphysical Rebellion,” in which Camus discusses the metaphysical aspects of rebellion and draws on the work of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche to analyse the concept. The subsection, “The Rejection of Salvation” deals with the consequences of God’s removal from the moral framework of the time, drawing on support from Dostoevsky’s \textit{The Brothers Karamazov}. In “Absolute Affirmation” he discusses the work of
Nietzsche and the concept of submitting God to moral judgment. Finally, in “Nihilism and History” he returns to the issue of rebellion and murder. The next and longest section of the book, “Historical Rebellion,” traces the concept of revolt and revolution through several of its various historical incarnations. In “The Regides” Camus examines the French Revolution, paying particular attention to Saint-Just and his justifications for The Rebellion. “The Decides” discusses how the ideals of the French revolution were taken to their next step by twentieth century philosophies, particular that of Hegel. “Individual Terrorism” Camus examines how German thinkers influenced the “adolescent nation” of Russia and how this type of thought led to terrorist states. “State Terrorism and Irrational Terror” looks at Hitler’s rebellion and the Nazi regime as an example of indoctrinated nihilism at its extremes. It is only when we get to “State Terrorism and Rational Terror” that Camus presents his criticism of Marxism and condemns the oppressive ideals of Russian Communism. Finally, with “Rebellion and Revolution” Camus considers his own period and where rebellion has brought them.

The fourth section, “Rebellion and Art” analyses the concept of rebellion in art and literature, examining many works including that of Van Gogh, Proust, and Shelley. Among the many points he makes is how people tend to view the lives of others with a coherence that can only be found in a work of art, and thus we tend to see others’ lives as novels. But unlike in the novel, love and misery are not eternal, that; “one morning, after many dark nights of despair, an
irrepressible longing to live will announce to us the fact that all is finished and
that suffering has no more meaning than happiness”.

But the final section, “Thoughts at the Meridian,” offers ideas that go
beyond Camus’ earlier works with conclusions regarding the ethics of society as
a whole. “Rebellion and Murder” answers the question Camus raises in his
introduction—that rebellion if unchecked does in fact lead to murder. But with
“Moderation and Excess” Camus uses the ancient Greek principle of
moderation. Finally, in “Beyond Nihilism” Camus brings his discussion to a
close by concluding that rebellion practised within its proper limitations brings
us beyond nihilism, affirms life, and serves the cause of man.

According to Camus, the act of rebellion itself is an affirmation of values:

We see that the affirmation implicit in every act of rebellion is
extended to something that transcends the individual in so far as it
withdraws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a
reason to act….Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself
worth preserving? It is for the sake of everyone in the world that
the slave asserts himself when he comes to the conclusion that a
command has infringed on something in him which does not
belong to him alone, but which is common ground where all
men—even the man who insults and oppresses him—have a
natural community.  

The slave who disobeys his master is not merely trying to avoid carrying out his
master’s orders, but by refusing to obey he is setting a limit to how far his master
can push him.

Setting this limit implicitly invokes a moral value, principle, or
right. The slave may be implying that there are some things even a
slave should not be ordered to do, or, more radically, that slavery
itself is wrong and she will no longer obey.
Rebellion is incompatible with a nihilist standpoint because without personal rights one cannot claim that anyone’s rights have been violated. Christianity plays two major roles in *The Rebel*, first as a target of rebellion and then as a vehicle for criticising Marxism. Long before he reaches his discussion of Marxist ideology, Camus groups Christianity together with other major theistic religions and discusses the metaphysical act of rebellion in which a person rejects God and tries to formulate moral values outside a religious framework.

But before man accepts the sacred world and in order that he should be able to accept it—or before he escapes from it and in order that he should be able to escape from it—there is always a period of soul-searching and rebellion. *The Rebel* is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacred and determined on laying claim to a human situation in which all the answers are human—in other words, formulated in reasonable terms…. Is it possible to find a rule of conduct outside the realm of religion and its absolute values? That is the question raised by rebellion.21

This is also the question that Camus struggles with through his entire career, a question that has plagued thinkers for centuries. Trying to formulate an ethical system without God is a difficult task to say the least, but for the metaphysical rebel, one that is absolutely necessary. A man rebels against God in the same way that a slave rebels against his master. He looks at a world characterized by cruelty and death and decides that if God exists, he is not worthy of worship.

He attacks a shattered world in order to demand unity from it. He opposes the principle of justice which he finds in himself to the principle of injustice which he sees being applied in the world….Metaphysical rebellion is a claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to
evil….The metaphysical rebel is therefore not definitely an atheist, as one might think him, but he is inevitably a blasphemer. Quite simply, he blasphemes primarily in the name of order, denouncing God as the father of death and as the supreme outrage.  

With this passage, Camus is very cleverly separating values from religion by pitting the principles of metaphysical rebellion against the cruelty of God. This type of rebellion affirms the values of order and justice, values which are found only within the human mind and not in the world of creation. If God is responsible for the creation of a world devoid of order and justice, God is in violation of these principles and can therefore be condemned. Although the usual consequence of rejecting God is to deny His existence, this need not be the case for the metaphysical rebel, who may grant that God exists but not that He is praiseworthy. Camus cites Nietzsche as a prime example of a metaphysical rebel, who rejects God and embraces nihilism.

Nietzsche’s supreme vocation, so he says, is to provoke a kind of crisis and a final decision about the problem of atheism. The world continues on its course at random and there is nothing final about it. Thus God is useless, since He wants nothing in particular. If He wanted something—and here we recognize the traditional formulation of the problem of evil—He would have to assume the responsibility for “a sum total of pain and inconsistency which would debase the entire value of being born.”

The problem of evil that suffering should not exist if the creator is omniscient, omnipotent and benevolent is at the heart of metaphysical rebellion. But although Camus is sympathetic to this type of view, he does not go as far as Nietzsche by advocating ethical nihilism. He in fact blames many of the atrocities of his time period on the twisting and misuse of Nietzsche’s thoughts,
just as he blames Christianity and its adulterations for many of the atrocities throughout history.

**THE PLAGUE**

The ideas of struggling against evil and a shared destiny with all men are expressed most explicitly in *The Rebel*, but years earlier Camus had used these themes for his novel, *The Plague*. Written shortly after the end of the Second World War, the novel is essentially an allegory for the situation in France and other parts of Europe during the time of the German occupation. Using the Algerian town of Oran as his setting, Camus reduces this immense tragedy down to artistically manageable proportions, isolating the town from the rest of the world when the gates are closed after the discovery of an outbreak of bubonic plague. Through a relatively small cast of characters, including Dr. Bernard Rieux who does his best to fight *The Plague* throughout the long tragedy, and Jean Tarrou, a stranger to the town of Oran who nevertheless sacrifices everything in the struggle against the disease, Camus expresses his ideas of steadfastness against violence and commitment to the plight of others with a level of moral insight that surpasses his earlier work.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* was concerned with the problem of suicide. In *The Plague* Camus substitutes this problem for that of a strange form of martyrdom, a kind of religion of happiness through atheistic sanctity.²⁴

*The Plague* is a story told in five parts. The first part introduces the character of Dr. Rieux, as he and his fellow townspeople deal with a sudden infestation of dead rats, which he soon realises is due to an outbreak of plague. Part II begins with the closing off of the town of Oran, blocking parted comrades
from each other and imprisoning those inside. One such victim is the journalist Rambert, who is prevented from returning to his wife in France. The town priest, Father Paneloux, delivers a sermon preaching that *The Plague* is an instrument of divine justice. Jean Tarrou, a visitor to Oran, decides to start a sanitation squad in an effort to help curb the spread of the disease. Part III merely describes the height of *The Plague*’s devastation, including the burial rituals which slowly diminish in formality until bodies are merely heaped upon one another in ditches. The longest and most dramatic section of the novel, Part IV, begins with Rambert’s attempts to escape and return to his wife, though after repeated failures he eventually decides to stay and help. Father Paneloux, after witnessing the death of a child infected by plague, delivers another sermon, much more sympathetic than the first. The main concepts behind Camus’ moral thinking at the time find their expression through Tarrou, who explains his aspiration “to become a saint without God” to Rieux. In the final section, Tarrou is claimed as one of *The Plague*’s last victims. When the infestation is over, the rats return, the town is reopened, Rambert is reunited with his wife, and Rieux reveals that he is the narrator.

That the narrator keeps his identity secret until the end is a deliberate move on Camus’ part to give the story a more universal quality—to make it about the events themselves rather than the individual experiences of a particular character. But although written in the third person, it is essentially a first-person narrative, with Rieux’s feelings constantly finding their expression throughout.

The pages written in chronicle style inform us of the events indirectly by means of the narrator’s reflections about them, rather
than directly. They give an impression of material distance: the narrator interposes himself between us and the events, and judges them after they have happened; also of spiritual distance: the plot seems to take on perspective, achieving a symbolical character.  

Through the use of symbolism and the interactions of his characters, Camus expresses a simple yet powerful moral vision that echoes his feelings in Letters to a German Friend and foreshadows his message in *The Rebel*. One of Camus’ most forceful criticisms of Christianity is expressed in *The Plague*, through the character of Father Paneloux. When *The Plague* breaks out in Oran, Father Paneloux is asked to deliver a sermon. He gives a suggestion to the anxious citizens that *The Plague* is a punishment from God which they deserve.

> If today *The Plague* is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff. There will be more chaff than wheat, few chosen of the many called….For a long while God gazed down on this town with eyes of compassion; but He grew weary of waiting, His eternal hope was too long deferred, and now He has turned His face away from us. And so, God’s light withdrawn, we walk in darkness, in the thick darkness of this plague.

That Camus finds such an attitude repugnant is not difficult to discern within the pages of *The Plague*, as distaste for the sermon is expressed on more than one occasion by Rieux and his companions. Later in the novel, however, Father Paneloux bears witness to an event that shakes his faith. The magistrate’s young boy, sick with plague, is administered a vaccine in a last desperate effort to save his life. The child convulses violently, wails in pain for a long time, and
finally dies. Angry with the dreadful circumstance, Rieux tries to leave the room but is stopped by Paneloux. Swinging around, Rieux exclaims; “Ah! That child, anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!” Here we have a dramatic presentation of the problem of evil—if *The Plague* is supposed to be God’s way of punishing the guilty, why are the innocent not spared? If God is infinitely good, how could he allow such a thing to happen? Paneloux’s reply is that he does not understand, but perhaps we should love what we do not understand. Rieux’s reply is cold and concise: “No, Father. I’ve a very different idea of love. And until my dying I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture”. Rieux’s attitude is that of the metaphysical rebel, who places the responsibility for the suffering of the world on God’s shoulders and judges him accordingly. But Paneloux remains steadfast in his resolve to accept the apparent cruelty, and trusts that God has a good reason for everything that happens. Shortly after the incident, he delivers another sermon trying to reconcile the horrors of *The Plague* with his faith in God’s perfection.

There was no doubt as to the existence of good and evil and, as a rule, it was easy to see the difference between them. The difficulty began when we looked into the nature of evil, and among things evil he included human suffering. Thus we had apparently needful pain, and apparently needless pain; we had Don Juan cast into hell, and a child’s death. For while it is right that a libertine should be struck down, we see no reason for a child’s suffering. And, truth to tell, nothing was more important on earth than a child’s suffering, the horror it inspires in us, and the reasons we must find to account for it....he might easily have assured them that the child’s sufferings would be compensated for by an eternity of bliss awaiting him. But how could he give that assurance when, to tell the truth, he knew nothing about it? For who would dare to assert that eternal happiness can compensate for a single moment’s human suffering?  

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28
Paneloux issues a kind of spiritual ultimatum. He acknowledges that we cannot possibly understand the reasons for a child’s suffering but if we cannot accept that there is a reason, we cannot accept God. “In other words, one must have faith that everything is an expression of God’s love or give up trying to be a Christian.”

For those who share Camus’ sentiments, the obvious reaction would be to give up Christianity, and accept what follows. When Paneloux contracts a mysterious disease shortly after his sermon and dies because he refuses to see a doctor, it serves as a warning against relying on faith in matters of life and death. But Camus does not discount the seriousness of losing faith.

The advantages of having faith are directly expressed in Paneloux’s sermon:

> 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.

The incomprehensibility of a child’s torture is replaced by its meaningless, and most would find it easier to handle suffering if there is a reason that simply surpasses our understanding than if there is no reason or justification whatsoever. However, Camus does not want to go so far as to endorse the belief in God simply as a way of handling life’s difficulties. This is the attitude expressed by Rieux when Tarrou asks him what reasons he has to struggle against *The Plague*. Rieux explains that he does not know and he does not do it out of pride nor out of any desire for a reward but he merely sees that there are sick people and he is inclined to defend them. When asked against whom he is defending them, Rieux again replies that he does not know, but that he has seen enough death to make him outraged at the entire scheme of things.
The idea of the absurd has much more of an abstract quality in *The Plague* than in Camus’ earlier work, but as always it is an ever-present theme. *The Plague* itself can be read as a metaphor for absurdity, or at least as the type of devastating circumstance such as a war that brings people face to face with the absurd. When *The Plague* initially breaks out, Rieux ponders how everyone was caught off guard by its appearance simply because it is not a normal part of the human experience.

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. Our townsfolk were not more to blame than others; they forgot to be modest, that was all, and thought that everything still was possible for them; which presupposed that pestilences were impossible. They went on doing business, arranged for journeys, and formed views. How should they have given a thought to anything like plague, which rules out any future, cancels journeys, silences the exchange of views. They fancied themselves free, and no one will ever be free so long as there are pestilences. 31

Like *Caligula*, *The Plague* teaches its victims of life’s absurdity by destroying freedom and killing at random. The universal death sentence that is the human condition is merely accentuated and made more immediate by *The Plague*. As war and tyranny grow stronger, freedom grows weaker. In the novel, it is plague that eventually engulfs the people and reduces the town from a free society into something more closely resembling a Nazi death camp. “No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the
emotions shared by all. But although the collective destiny of the people is one of suffering and death, the positive side is that the destiny is shared by them all. Rather than face absurdity on their own, the people stand together as victims. The feeling of exile is difficult to bear, but is a feeling common to them all. Once *The Plague* finally subsides, Rieux considers this prevalent emotion and its counter-part, the desire for a reunion.

For the first time Rieux found that he could give a name to the family likeness that for several months he had detected in the faces in the streets. He had only to look around him now. At the end of *The Plague*, with its misery and privations, these men and women had come to wear the aspect of the part they had been playing for so long, that part of emigrants whose faces first, and now their clothes, told of long banishment from a distant homeland.....Most of them had longed intensely for an absent one, for the warmth of a body, for love, or merely for a life that habit had endeared. Some, often without knowing it, suffered from being deprived of the company of friends and from their inability to get in touch with them through the usual channels of friendship—letters, trains, and boats. Others, fewer these—Tarrou may have been one of them—had desired reunion with something they couldn’t have defined, but which seemed to them the only desirable thing on earth. For want of a better name, they sometimes called it peace.  

When a person is forced to confront the absurd, there are bound to be difficulties. But when forced to confront the true horrors of the world on a large scale with many other people, a feeling of solidarity is bound to develop, and out of the ashes will rise the values needed to face the absurd with assurance. The type of exile that Rieux is thinking of when he refers to Tarrou is the self-imposed exile of a man dedicated to a moral life. A great deal of Camus’ ideas on morality at the time is expressed through the character of Tarrou, most notably during a very revealing conversation he has with Rieux towards the end of the novel. Tarrou speaks of his childhood; his father having been a prosecutor,
the young Tarrou had witnessed a man sentenced to be executed, and felt such a great sympathy for the man that he resolved always to take the side of the victim.

Pending that release, I know I have no place in the world of today; once I’d definitely refused to kill, I doomed myself to an exile that can never end. I leave it to others to make history. I know, too, that I’m not qualified to pass judgment on those others. There’s something lacking in my mental make-up, and its lack prevents me from being a rational murderer. So it’s a deficiency, not superiority. But as things are, I’m willing to be as I am; I’ve learned modesty. All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it’s up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can’t judge if it’s simple, but I know it’s true. You see, I’d heard such quantities of arguments, which very nearly turned my head, and turned other people’s heads enough to make them approve of murder; and I’d come to realize that all our troubles spring from our failure to use plain, clean-cut language. So I resolved always to speak out—and to act—quite clearly, as this was the only way of setting myself on the right track.33

In this speech we see the heart of Camus’ message from his entire moralist period: that there are murderous and there are victims, and to do the right thing we must side with the victims. Just like in The Rebel, Camus cautions us against arguments that justify murder, and encourages the use of simple, clear-cut language, lest our words be twisted and used to promote atrocities. Another element of the kind of morality Camus is promoting in The Plague is the right to pursue happiness. This can be seen most clearly in Rieux’s reaction to the character of Rambert, a journalist who has the misfortune of being caught in Oran when The Plague breaks out and the gates are closed. Separated from his wife, Rambert pleads with Rieux to help him escape and return to her. At first, Rieux is somewhat put off by the request and tells him that there is nothing he can do, but as time goes on he becomes more and more
sympathetic. At one point, Rieux warns Rambert that the magistrate has his eye on him, and that he’d better hurry up with his plans to escape. Rambert thanks him, then asks him why Rieux has not tried to prevent him from leaving.

Rieux shook his head with his usual deliberateness. It was none of his business, he said. Rambert had elected for happiness, and he, Rieux, had no argument to put up against him. Personally he felt incapable of deciding which was the right course and which the wrong in such a case as Rambert’s. 34

Rieux is conflicted between his opinion that everyone in the town should be doing their part to help, and his sympathy for Rambert who is caught in a bad situation. When Rambert asks why he had bothered to give him the warning, Rieux replies, “Perhaps because I, too, would like to do my bit for happiness”. 35 Camus’ message is certainly a simple one, which has led some to argue that it is actually too simple to help. Another criticism levelled against Camus is that his message can simply be reduced to “heroism”. Tarrou by all outward appearances aspires to be a hero, to “become a saint without God” and sacrifices himself for the benefit of others. To some it would seem that Camus is merely exalting heroism rather than providing any real moral insight, but a close reading of the text suggests otherwise.

The Tarrou side of Camus, in truth the temptation of heroism, is apparent in Camus’s tendency to refuse emotion, in the kind of inflexibility with which he comes to grips with fate and which is often reflected in stiffness in his style, in his constant search from the concise phrase. ‘What interest me,’ says Tarrou with simplicity, ‘is to know how one becomes a saint.’ Evidently, Camus, too, is interested. But in his moments of weakness, when the demands he makes upon himself grow weak, Rieux, who, after all, is the narrator of the book and who survives whereas Tarrou dies, answers his friend, his alter ego: ‘I have no taste, I believe, for heroism and sainthood. What interests me is to be a man.’ 36
Camus may admire the quality of heroism, but his message is not simply that everyone ought to aspire to be a hero or martyr. It is enough merely to be a good person, to restrain oneself from doing harm, and when harm is forced upon one (as *The Plague* is forced upon the citizens of Oran) to do one’s best to fight it. Struggling against evil is not merely for heroes; it should be expected of all men. Camus expresses this sentiment through Rieux when he describes the work of the sanitation squads:

Doubtless today many of our fellow citizens are apt to yield to the temptation of exaggerating the services they rendered. But the narrator is inclined to think that by attributing over importance to praiseworthy actions one may, by implication, be paying indirect but potent homage to the worse side of human nature. For this attitude implies that such actions shine out as rare exceptions, while callousness and apathy are the general rule. The narrator does not share that view. The evil that is in the world always comes out of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding.

This idea will be developed further in *The Rebel*, namely how evil usually results from ignorance and misunderstanding rather than any real wickedness on the part of human beings, whom Camus sees as essentially good. If evil springs from ignorance, good in much the same respect comes through understanding. The value of solidarity that Camus preaches in *The Rebel* can also be found in *The Plague* as Rieux reflects on the shared experiences he has had with his fellow citizens. At the end of the novel when he reveals his identity as the narrator, he explains his efforts to restrain himself from making the story too personal.

All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victim’s side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common—love, exile, and suffering. Thus he can truly say there was not one of their anxieties
in which he did not share, no predicament of theirs that was not his. 38

The final message of The Plague is Camus’ appeal to those of us living in times of peace, in which the value of solidarity and standing together with a common cause is not so readily attainable. It is our duty to remember that peaceful times cannot endure forever, and to be ready to stand up and struggle for what is right should violent times ever again be forced upon us.

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that The Plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.39

As Rieux reflects earlier in the novel, war and plague are not a regular part of the human experience, yet the tendency toward ignorance and violence are ever-present within every mind.

• THE STRANGER

Between the publication of his first novel The Stranger in 1942 and his last novel The Fall in 1956, many key elements of Camus’ perspective change completely. Though he always maintains the view that life is essentially absurd and morality comes from human beings rather than God, his mind changes about how we as human beings ought to live in this absurd world. Camus first examines the ethical implications of an absurd existence in The Stranger, one of the most widely read and influential books of the twentieth century. Written in short, self-contained sentences to give the text more of an absurd quality, The
Stranger is told from the perspective of Meursault, a young man living in Algiers. From the very beginning we can see that this is a peculiar man. In the opening line of the novel, the narrator mentions the death of his mother, but expresses more concern with remembering which day it actually happened than his emotions regarding it. It would seem that Meursault either has no emotions, or emotions very different than those we experience.

The first section of the novel describes a period of five days during which we learn about Meursault and his eccentricities. The essential aspect of his personality is his complete lack of concern with matters that people normally find important. One of the clearest examples comes through a conversation with his girlfriend:

That evening Marie came by to see me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said it didn’t make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to. Then she wanted to know if I loved her. I answered the same way I had the last time, that it didn’t mean anything but that I probably didn’t love her. ‘So why marry me, then?’ she said. I explained to her that it didn’t really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married….Then she pointed out that marriage was a serious thing. I said, ‘No.’

It seems that nothing is important to Meursault, even the way he lives his own life. In making decisions he does not look for the right path but merely the path of least resistance, and most of the circumstances in his life are controlled by chance. It is by chance that he meets Raymond, who gets him involved in a conflict which leads to Meursault’s killing of an Arab on the beach at the end of the first section. No clear reason is ever given in the narrative for why Meursault shoots the Arab; the only explanation offered is the overwhelming heat of the sun. In Part Two, Meursault is tried and convicted of the crime, but his
conviction has more to do with his personality than with his crime. Most of the philosophical content is found in the final chapter, in which Meursault, awaiting his execution, is provoked by the prison chaplain’s attempts to convert him. Who is Meursault supposed to represent? He is clearly not a representation of the average human being, and indeed it almost seems that no such person could really exist. In fact, he is the embodiment of the absurd as Camus envisions the concept in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

What, in fact, is the Absurd Man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own. A greater life for him cannot mean another life.⁴¹

Meursault is the absurd hero, living only from moment to moment and performing only the basic functions of life. The past and the future do not matter to him. He is not concerned with an afterlife, and has no interest in God. It may be that *life* is important to him, but it makes no difference to him how one lives. These are Meursault’s views, which do not represent the views of Camus. If Camus did not think that how one lives is important, he would not have devoted so much energy struggling with ethical dilemmas. The message is not in Meursault himself but in how the rest of the world *reacts* to him. “*The Stranger* he wants to portray is precisely one of those terrible innocents who chock society by not accepting the rules of its game.”⁴² By having him sentenced to
death, Camus makes a political point; the only solution society has for such a person is to get rid of him.

Meursault represents a real threat. Although he is certainly neither a hardened criminal nor the Antichrist, he is an incarnation of the absurd hero. What is ‘monstrous’ about this man is not his propensity to commit crimes or do evil; it is, rather, his indifference to the hopes, faith, and ideals by which most people live. By not caring about God, his own future, or what respectable people think about him, Meursault has become a dangerous man, a rebel. It is clear that Camus is not advocating Meursault’s way of thought. Camus does not want us to give up our values and live with indifference toward the world, but rather for us to accept the indifference of the world toward us and our values. In confronting the absurd, we should not immediately dismiss it because it threatens our values. It only forces us to see that our values come only from ourselves.

Camus makes the same point fourteen years later in his last completed novel, *The Fall*, but in a very different way and with a different overall ethical outlook. The narrative is in the form of a one-sided conversation between the narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, and an anonymous man he meets in a bar in Amsterdam. Clamence calls himself a “judge-penitent” but does not reveal the nature of this title until the final chapter of the book. Except for an occasional change in setting, nothing happens in the novel other than Clamence’s account of his life and his thoughts regarding it. We learn that he had been a successful
lawyer in Paris until something happened which caused him to give up his
former life and become a judge-penitent in Amsterdam.

In Paris, Clamence had built himself an image as a champion of those in
need by defending clients he saw as “noble” criminals. Well-known and
respected for his chivalrousness and generosity, he had always done his best to
help others whenever possible. However, he is not hesitant to reveal that all of
his “selfless” acts were actually motivated by selfishness, as a means of raising
himself above others to grander heights.

My profession satisfied most happily that vocation for summits. It
cleansed me of all bitterness toward my neighbour, whom I always
obligated without ever owing him anything. It set me above the
judge whom I judged in turn, above the defendant whom I forced
to gratitude. Just weigh this, cher monsieur, I lived with
impunity.43

Despite being perfectly aware of his selfishness, Clamence makes no
attempt to overcome it. Yet the defining incident of his life is one in which his
own selfishness horrifies him. He describes seeing a woman on a bridge while
walking the streets of Paris late one night and then hearing her fall into the
water. Instead of giving in to save her or call for help, he walks away and tells
nobody. He resumes his normal life but some years later hears laughter behind
him in the streets and is unable to tell where it is coming from. He forms the
idea that others are laughing at him because they know he is not who he pretends
to be. From then on he is haunted by the laughter and obsessed with the notions
of judgment and forgiveness. The rest of Clamence’s life is spent trying to
escape the laughter, and he does so by inventing and assuming the role of judge-
penitent. Clamence sees the self-created occupation of judge-penitent as a necessity that arises out of two aspects of absurdity: death and freedom.

Clamence has become convinced that one cannot die without confessing all of one’s sins. This is an expression of Sartre’s belief that a man sacrifices his identity to others at the moment he dies. A man ceases to exist as he sees himself and exists solely as others see him. If a man lives his entire life pretending to be someone else and dies without telling anyone, he ceases to exist. Because there is no God to know the truth, and nobody has any awareness of the person he really was, only the person he had pretended to be continues to exist in some form. Clamence had been afraid that this was the fate in store for him. A much more difficult problem for Clamence is freedom. Like death, his view of freedom is also related to Sartre’s in that there is no determinism, and human beings are free to act however they choose in any situation. The only limiting factors are the physical laws of the universe, one’s body, one’s past, and the will of others. Sartre believes that freedom causes anguish because we cannot escape the need to make decisions. Clamence admits that he used to celebrate freedom, but has since changed his mind.

I didn’t know that freedom is not a reward or a decoration that is celebrated with champagne….It’s a chore, on the contrary, and a long-distance race, quite solitary and very exhausting….Alone in a forbidding room, alone in the prisoner’s box before the judges, and alone to decide in face of oneself or in the face of other’s judgment. At the end of all freedom is a court sentence; that’s why freedom is too heavy to bear, especially when you’re down with a fever, or are distressed, or love nobody.
Anguished by his freedom and frightened by his awareness of death, Clamence finds a solution to both problems by becoming a judge-penitent. What he does is hang around a seedy bar in Amsterdam looking for intelligent people who may serve his purposes. He talks to them for days and confesses everything about himself, reveals to them all of his vices and misdeeds, then waits for them to do the same. This serves to alleviate Clamence’s worries about death. By letting others know the truth about himself, he no longer needs to worry about any of his lies being made definitive. One the other hand, the burden of freedom and the guilt we possess as a result of it can never be eliminated, although it can be lightened. Judgment cannot be escaped but it can be shared:

Is not the great thing that stands in the way of our escaping it [judgment] the fact that we are the first to condemn ourselves? Therefore it is essential to begin by extending the condemnation to all, without distinction, in order to thin it out at the start.\(^45\)

In confessing he is not asking for forgiveness, nor is he offering it. He is concerned only with understanding. He wants people to understand that they are not different from him. By judging himself he forces others to judge themselves, thus spreading the burden of freedom and alleviating his guilt.

**The Guest**

*The Guest* is considered one of Camus’ most important works of fiction. It was published in 1957 as part of the collection titled, Exile and the Kingdom. *The Guest* touches on many of Camus’ major moral and philosophical ideas. It is also concerned with important colonial issues of the period. He worked on the story during the years leading up to the Algerian War that broke out in 1954. Camus was careful to avoid worsening the tensions between the French and Arab Algerians through the portrayal of his characters, and as a result the story
went through multiple revisions. As a result of these revisions, the narrative grew more ambiguous, specifically in the portrayal of the Arab.

The events in the story take place at the outset of the Algerian War. They follow the schoolmaster Daru as he faces the moral dilemma of what to do with an Arab prisoner who has been delivered to him by a gendarme named Balducci. The story is primarily about the problematic nature of having a prisoner in one's home, and thematizes aspects of Algerian culture and free will.

Camus’ political, moral, and philosophical beliefs were still developing when he wrote *The Guest*, but the story nevertheless embodies Camus’ view of the human condition. Camus agreed with Kierkegaard that despair is not an act, but a human state. He saw this state of despair resulting from isolation from the rest of the world. The Guest charts Daru’s journey into a state of moral despair against the backdrop of his solitude.

Daru’s state of isolation is obvious from the start as he watches two strangers approach. He views them dispassionately from his distance atop the plateau, unable even to recognize his friend. Daru has been alone for days; yet he is not necessarily lonely. He is even grateful for his situation compared with the poverty and hunger of the natives of the plateau. His state of isolation is thus a state of self-sufficiency. Daru seems capable of carrying on indefinitely, as long as his basic needs of shelter, food and warmth are met. Indeed, the story examines each of these needs the bags of grain in the classroom, the warmth of Daru’s small lodgings or his need for a sweater while watching the two men.
While Daru waits for the two men to reach the schoolhouse, his thoughts reveal the characteristics of the region. The inhospitable terrain that dominates the plateau represents Camus’ notion of the absurd, where the universe is completely silent and indifferent towards humanity. The land is not giving or forgiving; it is simply cruel. Camus regularly suggests this natural harshness, as when the two men are forced to navigate the hill without the guide of a path. Nature's ice and snow makes an already difficult trek all the more treacherous. Nature also behaves very irrationally. After an eight-month draught, nature finally supplies water in the absurd form of snow. By itself, these weather conditions are simply a fact of nature, but combined with human need, the extremity represents Camus’ idea of the absurd. He creates a representation of the absurd by joining extreme physical conditions with basic human survival needs. The absurd is not in man or in the world, but in their presence together. It is the only bond uniting them. One of many examples of humans struggling to survive in the harsh natural conditions is Daru’s recollection of the starving people wandering the plateau during the draught. The plateau will not help them.

When Daru returns to the classroom the narrator describes the four rivers of France that are drawn on the blackboard. This is the introduction of the political and cultural currents that are one of the main foundations of the story. Written at the onset of the Algerian uprising against the French, the tension between the Arab culture and the ruling French creates much distress in the story. Those European Algerians and the Arabs share the same harsh climate; the political and cultural tension between them prevents any feelings of camaraderie.
Daru’s schoolhouse, where he also lives, has windows that look towards the south. This view to the south is where he first spots the two men but once he has found warmer clothes he can no longer see them from the window. At the end of the story he looks to the south hoping to see the Arab traveling in that direction and these windows foreshadow the hope to see such a sight in the south. For now, the south represents the Arab territories. Europe lies to the north, over the sea and contains indigenous settlements. The Arab is carried out of his cultural milieu away from his family and his local customs and forced to submit to a European justice system.

When the visitors arrive, Daru immediately scrutinizes the Arab for clues as to his crime. He notices everything from the Arab’s clothes to his demeanor, yet he can never truly know the Arab with certainty. The Arab’s motivations, his past actions, his guilt or innocence are all indeterminate. Daru will never have enough knowledge about the Arab to pass judgment on him. Needless to say, the reader is also allowed only partial knowledge of the Arab.

The theme of freedom is an integral part of Camus’ absurdist philosophy. Within the state of the absurd, Camus sees an individual's freedom to choose as something that gives value to life. Through freedom of action an individual can find meaning in an otherwise meaningless and indifferent world. The interaction between Balducci and Daru stresses the importance of freedom. Their interaction makes up a majority of the dialogue in the story, and revolves primarily around the orders that Balducci delivers. Daru maintains his freedom to make his own decision, and Balducci honors Daru’s choice. However, their understanding
follows from their political affiliation; the Arab’s freedom is a much thornier issue. Daru seems predisposed to grant the Arab freedom from the beginning, as illustrated when he unbinds the Arab’s hands and gives him tea.

Another function of their dialogue is to flesh out the political backdrop of the story. Balducci speaks of a revolution, which clearly references the Algerian uprising. The Algerian War displaced millions of people against their will, and so discussion of this rebellion certainly implicates Camus ideas on freedom. They are also connected to the Daru’s sense of belonging within this remote region.

Throughout, Camus uses free indirect style to enhance ambiguity and uncertainty in the narrative. The narrator’s descriptions mingle with Daru’s thoughts, at times appearing inseparable. This ambiguity keeps the reader from certain knowledge. Thus the problem of partial knowledge that pervades the story influences even Camus’ writing style.

In the moments immediately following Balducci’s departure, Daru listens to the silence surrounding him. The landscape represents Camus’ idea of an indifferent universe: devoid of logic and silent to the needs of humankind. Daru listens to the silence as if it is an entity. He recalls his struggle to adjust to it and also to the pervading solitude. His opinion of the region is an echo of Camus’ philosophy of life. Camus believes that it is the freedom to choose and an individual’s experience that give meaning to life. Daru finds meaning in his life through his decision to live in this cruel landscape, and in this way he has come to terms with the pervasive silence.
The Arab however, represents the beginning of a shift in the way Daru feels about the plateau region. By the end of the narrative he no longer feels attached to it. The Arab is an extremely complicated and ambiguous character. He offers neither Daru nor the reader any answers. Daru has mixed emotions: he feels revolted by the prisoner’s alleged crime, yet he does not want to lead him to imprisonment. His inability to make a clear judgment on the Arab results from a lack of knowledge, which eventually alienates him from the plateau region and leaves him in a moral no-man’s land.

Daru hopes that his moral dilemma will simply go away. He hopes that the prisoner will escape. He gives the Arab many chances, leaving him alone in the classroom and hoping that the Arab has fled during the night. Daru’s fear of making a decision represents his inability to acknowledge the absurd; although there is no good choice, Camus feels that the act of making a choice and standing by that choice is the most important thing a human being can do. His unwillingness to be the prisoner’s prosecutor is based on logic: he has no concrete proof of the man's guilt, and it goes against his code of honor. However, justice, like nature, is an unfeeling, absurd abstraction. Though Daru proves able to face down the absurdity of the landscape, he cannot handle political and judicial ambiguity, and thus finds himself completely isolated.

Daru continually strives to imbue his essentially meaningless choice with some clear logic. He tries to learn about the Arab through conversation; however, their cultural differences preclude understanding. Meanwhile, sharing his room with the Arab imposes upon Daru a feeling of fraternity for the Arab.
He is clearly unable to control the circumstances surrounding his choice; nevertheless, he must choose. Daru consistently fails to do so.

One of the chief ambiguities in this section is the evidence that creeps up now and then that Daru and the Arab are not alone. Daru hears a rustling around the house during the night and again when he and the Arab set out in the morning. Camus suggests that the Arab's friends are circling the schoolhouse to see what Daru plans on doing with the prisoner. However, there in no way to prove this hypothesis with certainty; the sounds Daru hears may be those of animals, or simply the result of his paranoia. The feeling that a hidden society is waiting to pass judgement on Daru haunts the story. Those judges do not know the whole story of Daru’s moral struggle, just as Daru does not know the Arab’s story, they will pass judgement anyway.

On the morning of their journey, Daru cannot find a way of his complex situation. He fails to choose, instead trying to pass his choice along to the prisoner. He shows the Arab the direction east, and also the direction south, and then leaves him to decide where to go. He leaves the Arab, but returns when his anxiety to know how the Arab has chosen gets the most of him. Perhaps he believes that in allowing the Arab to choose he will find out the truth of his guilt. Yet the Arab’s choice does not provide any answers for him or the reader. Indeed, it's ambiguous whether the Arab even understood Daru’s explanation of the difference between going east and going south.

The end of The Guest embodies the overwhelming solitude that pervades the narrative. The landscape symbolizes Daru’s isolation. However, where he
once felt ‘at home’ on the plateau because he chose to live there, thus embracing its absurdity-the episode with the Arab has left him in a state of radical uncertainty. He views the Arab moving through the harsh landscape with new eyes, feeling its desperate solitude. He no longer feels ‘at home’ on the plateau, because the natural landscape has become associated with the moral dilemma of the Arab, and with the Arab’s choice to walk toward imprisonment. In failing to make a decision, he has allowed the Arab to impose a new meaning on the landscape.

Daru’s return home emphasizes this newfound despair. His window looks south, which is the direction the Arab would have taken for freedom. Thus the window reminds him both of the Arab’s failure to choose freedom, and his own failure to choose the Arab’s fate.

Daru’s alienation from the plateau region becomes all the more concrete, and all the more dangerous, with the writing on the blackboard. Camus leaves it unclear who wrote the note. Perhaps Daru himself wrote it as an expression of his morally complex state of despair. However, the note may have been written by Daru’s friends. If so, they replay the moral problem that faced Daru. Though the people who wrote it have no access to Daru’s moral struggle, they are in a position to pass judgment upon him for it.
References:


4. Ibid., p. 23.

5. Ibid., p. 23.

6. Ibid., p. 42.


8. Ibid., p. 89.

9. Ibid., p. 90.


11. Ibid., p. vi.

12. Ibid., p. 72.

13. Ibid., p. 21.


15. Ibid., p. 73.

16. Ibid., p. vi.


18. Ibid., p. 261.

19. Ibid., p. 16.


44. Ibid., p.133.

45. Ibid., p.133.