The Myth of Sisyphus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALBERT CAMUS

Albert Camus was born in Algeria when it was still a French colony. His father, Lucien, died in World War I when Camus was still a baby. Camus' mother, an illiterate house cleaner, brought him up thereafter. Showing aptitude for his schooling, Camus was accepted to the University of Algiers. Here he developed his sense of political engagement, joining first the Communist Party and later the Algerian People's Party. In 1930 he contracted tuberculosis, causing him to give up playing soccer (he was a skillful goalkeeper) and meaning he had to study part-time. He graduated in 1936. Camus joined the French Resistance at the beginning of World War II, and worked for an underground resistance newspaper, eventually becoming its editor in 1943. It was during his military service, too, that he met Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential philosopher. In 1942, Camus published *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the first of a number of works that strove to look at the meaning of life and elucidate Camus' theory of absurdism. Also that year, he published his first novel *The Outsider* (also translated as *The Stranger*). *The Plague* followed in 1947, and *The Fall* in 1952. In 1957, Camus was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (becoming the second youngest recipient after Rudyard Kipling). He died in 1960 as the result of a car accident. Camus was married twice, but had strong criticisms of the institution.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Albert Camus began writing at a turbulent time in the history of mankind. His father was a casualty of World War I, and not long after Camus found himself part of the French Resistance during World War II. The Vichy government had capitulated to the Nazis, surrendering Paris and much of the rest of France too. Perhaps this historical moment can be detected in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which represents nothing less than an inquiry into the apparent meaninglessness of life. Furthermore, Camus' military service kept him away from his native Algeria, perhaps evidenced by the book's recurrent mention of man's exile from the world (or from understanding the world). In employing the Greek myth of Sisyphus, though, Camus is keen to stress the *ahistorical* nature of what he is discussing. That is, though the warring of the twentieth century might have heightened the futility of life—made it more prominently visible—Camus sees the problem of absurdity as one simply fundamental to the human condition. For Camus, mankind's longing for meaning in a meaningless world was a fact of existence in the past and will remain so in the future.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Camus studied philosophy at university, and an inquiry into the meaning of life—or lack of—forms the basis of much of his work. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines his philosophy of absurdism—which, in brief, is the confrontation between man's longing for meaning and the world's refusal to provide it—through discussion of other philosophers. In fact, Camus explicitly claims not to be a philosopher, such is the distinction he draws between himself and these other writers. Accordingly, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl and Friedrich Nietzsche all crop up intermittently throughout the work. Camus feels all of them have one fatal flaw (aside, perhaps, from Nietzsche): that they try to resolve the absurd, rather than finding a way to live with it in full view. Later in the book, Camus turns to literature in an effort to see if absurd art is possible. He praises the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (author of *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*), for his ability to show the absurd as it functions in daily life, but criticizes Dostoevsky the man for turning back to God in order to resolve life's meaninglessness. In the book, Camus also cites Franz Kafka, Honoré de Balzac, Marcel Proust and others as writers whom he feels expose the absurdity of life in their work. Camus' own novels, such as *The Plague*, were to exert a great influence of the twentieth century and beyond.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Myth of Sisyphus*
- **When Written:** 1942
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** 1942
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Philosophy
- **Setting:** N/A
- **Climax:** Sisyphus pushes his rock up the mountain.
- **Antagonist:** The world
- **Point of View:** First-person and third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Unlikely Tragedy. On the day of his fatal car crash, Camus had intended to take the train. In fact, he had the ticket for the train in his pocket at the time of his death.

Camus' Vice. Camus was a lifelong smoker and had a pet cat called Cigarette.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus aims to draw out his definition of absurdism and, later in the book, consider what strategies are available to people in living with the absurd. The absurd is often mischaracterized as the simple idea that life is meaningless. In fact, Camus defines the absurd as the confrontation between man's desire for logic, meaning and order, and the world's inability to satisfy this desire. Camus believes that confronting the absurd takes precedence over all other philosophical problems, because it is intimately linked with the act of suicide. People commit suicide when life is meaningless, he says, and sometimes to defend the meaning that they do perceive (for instance, someone dying for a political cause). If life *is* meaningless, which is a proposition Camus certainly agrees with, is it logical to commit suicide—dutiful, even? Camus outlines how people turn to religion and hold on to the hope of a better life that never comes in order to suppress the absurd. Camus wants to know if it's possible to live in full awareness of the fact that life is meaningless.

Camus examines the work of philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Lev Chestov, Karl Jaspers and Edmund Husserl. All of these, says Camus, went some way to outlining the absurdity of life. But each of them has a fatal flaw—they were too afraid to commit to the absurdity of life, and instead restored meaning to the world through a leap of faith (usually to God). They try to conjure meaning out of meaninglessness, which Camus sees as distinctly irrational. Camus argues for three main characteristics of the absurd life: revolt, freedom and passion. The absurd life must resist any temptation for answers or explanations in life; act and think with total freedom; and pursue life with passion.

In "The Absurd Man," Camus tries to move towards a more practical approach to the absurd, providing examples of figures that he feels have accommodating the absurd into their lives. For Camus, it is not about finding a solution to the absurd, but living a life that maintains full awareness of life's meaninglessness. As an illustrative example, he looks first at Don Juan, a notorious seducer. He praises Don Juan for living a life of quantity, rather than quality—since no experience is inherently more valuable than any other, the absurd man should strive to experience as much as he can. In Don Juan's case, this means sex with as many different women as possible. Camus' other examples of absurd lives are actors—who live in the present and try out many different lives—and conquerors, whose political and violent struggles add urgency and vividness to life.

Camus then turns his attentions to the relationship between the absurd and creation. The creative life, says Camus, is an especially absurd one. Artists expend great energy on their creation, though their creation is ultimately meaningless. The creator can only experience and describe, not explain and solve; Camus is disdainful of those works that have a "smug" motive of proving a particular "truth." Within this framework, Camus examines the writings of the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevksy. In particular, he looks at a character from *The Possessed*, Kirilov, who commits a kind of "logical suicide." In order for life to have meaning, Kirilov thinks, God must exist—but Kirilov intuitively feels that there is no God and decides to take control by killing himself. His last words are "all is well," which for Camus are precisely the words that living with the absurd require. Though Camus praises Dostoevsky for showing the absurd in action—which is a special capability of novels as opposed to philosophy—he criticizes Dostoevsky for turning back to God later in his personal life.

Camus concludes his essay by discussing the myth of Sisyphus mentioned in the title. Sisyphus, a Greek King, was condemned by the gods. His eventual fate was to push a **rock** up a mountain, only for it to fall back down, necessitating the process to start over again and again for all eternity. There are different stories about why Sisyphus incurred the wrath of the gods but, in essence, he disrespected them. One of the stories is that he put Death in chains, angering the god Pluto. Just before he died, Sisyphus wanted to test his wife's love by ordering that she "cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square." Annoyed that she actually did so, instead of burying him properly, he received permission from Pluto to return to earth in order to chastise her. Upon his return from the underworld, Sisyphus fell in love with the earth again—particularly its natural beauty—and refused to leave. Mercury was sent to retrieve Sisyphus, and when Sisyphus got back to the underworld his rock and the eternal, futile labor it represents were waiting for him. In this fate, Camus sees the struggle of man longing for meaning in a meaningless world. Sisyphus, says Camus, is the ultimate "absurd hero," because he is fully aware of the futility of his actions. The moment when Sisyphus walks back to the foot of the mountain is the one that most interests Camus, representing Sisyphus' "hour of consciousness" and total understanding of his fate. Camus pictures Sisyphus saying that "all is well," like Kirilov did earlier. It is necessary, says Camus, to "imagine Sisyphus happy."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sisyphus – Though Sisyphus doesn't make an appearance until the concluding chapter, he is a central character to the book and, of course, named in the title. He is a Greek mortal, known for his trickery and deceit, and condemned by the gods to an eternity of futile labor. He is made to push a **rock** up a mountain, only for it to fall down once he's at the top—he is fated to start this process over again and repeat into infinity. There are a variety of stories regarding why Sisyphus so

angered the gods, though Camus doesn't go into any great detail about any of them (as Sisyphus is more of a symbol than a story). One story tells that Sisyphus put Death in chains, which for a while meant that no one died on earth. Pluto (also known as Hades), the godly king of the underworld, was angered. Later, when Sisyphus was close to death, he instructed his wife to throw his body in the public square (and skip the usual burial rites). This was a trick, as Sisyphus was then able to negotiate with the gods his return to earth in order to chastise his wife for her behavior. Back on earth, he fell in love with the place all over again and refused to go back to the underworld. Eventually, the gods fetched him and put him to the eternal labor of pushing the rock up the mountain. Camus sees Sisyphus as the "absurd hero," because his work is futile and he is fully aware of its meaninglessness. Camus imagines an "hour of consciousness" in Sisyphus as he walks back down to bottom of the mountain, fully able to contemplate and face up to his existence. Furthermore, Camus believes it is important to "imagine" Sisyphus happy, echoing the author's suggestion that the absurd must be fully embraced rather than hidden from.

Albert Camus – Camus is the author of The Myth of Sisyphus and most of the book is written directly from his perspective as an address to his reader. The book sets out his theory of the Absurd, which he also explores in his novels. In essence, Camus believes that mankind longs for knowledge, reason and logic, while the world refuses to answer that longing—this conflict is the Absurd. Camus wants to find a way of living in full view of the absurd—otherwise, he wonders if suicide is the only valid response. Though Camus frequently reminds the reader that he is not a philosopher, The Myth of Sisyphus reads like philosophy. The philosophers he chooses to respond to are those he would have studied at university. Ultimately, Camus believes that an "absurd life" is possible—individuals should not reject the absurd, but bring into their daily existence. This, in essence, means living in the moment and living for a greater "quantity" of experience, rather than "quality."

Don Juan – Don Juan is Albert Camus' first example of an "absurd man" (found in the chapter of the same name), by which he means someone who successfully lives with the absurd in full view (though any notion of success is ultimately meaningless because of the inevitability of death). Don Juan is a character that appears in numerous works of literature and art (e.g. opera) and is best known for his unrivalled powers of seduction. He moves from woman to woman without hesitation, living a "quantitative" life that Camus sees as befitting someone who is aware of the absurd.

The Actor – Albert Camus holds up the actor-figure as another example of an "absurd man." In essence, Camus is talking about stage actors rather than film. He sees the actor as an "absurd figure" because he acts out ephemeral lives for ephemeral fame (again, this is much more appropriate to the stage actor than Hollywood celebrities). Camus believes that the actor "demonstrates to what degree appearing creates being," which aids to show the illusory nature of most people's lives.

The Conqueror – The conqueror is Albert Camus' third example of an "absurd man." That said, he is not so much a conqueror as a general soldier/fighter—he engages in warfare but not necessarily in order to rule over new territory. Camus sees the conqueror as incorporating the absurd because he lives for the moment, motivated by his heightened sense of his possible death. This gives life greater vivacity and intensifies "fraternity" and "friendship" among men. It's worth noting that, at the time of writing The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus was part of the French Resistance in World War Two. Violent conflict was therefore very much a real threat, perhaps creating the kind of conditions which Camus ascribes to the conqueror. Here, the conqueror has little animosity towards an "enemy," and is more concerned with making a mark on history. That said, he is not deluded into thinking that this impact on history has any greater meaning outside of itself.

Kirilov – Kirilov is a character that Camus discusses in the 'Absurd Creation' chapter. He comes from Fyodor Dostoevsky's book The Possessed (also translated as Demons or The Devils). Camus praises Dostoevksy for the character, who seems to embody elements of the absurd in his daily life. Like Camus, Kirilov is only interested in dealing with certainties (and then proceeding wherever the consequences might lead). For Kirilov, for the world to have meaning depends on their being a God. But he can't bring himself to believe in God, and therefore decides that, in terms of having control over his own will, he is essentially his own god. Kirilov commits what Camus calls "logical suicide" because he wants to demonstrate his own "freedom" (which he feels will benefit others too). His final words before shooting himself are "all is well"—these neatly sum up the approach Camus believes is necessary in the face of the absurd: to accept it and live with it.

Fyodor Dostoevsky – Dostoevsky is a 19th Century Russian novelist, frequently cited as one of the greatest writers ever to have existed. Camus praises his ability to bring the absurd to life (in his novels) and show how people grapple with the very real problems brought about by knowledge of the absurd. In his own life Dostoevsky ultimately turned away from the absurd by embracing Christianity, which Camus sees an invalid response to the absurd.

Soren Kierkegaard – Kierkegaard is a 19th century Danish philosopher and generally considered to be the father of the loose philosophical movement of existentialism. Camus praises him for having accurately described the absurd, but criticizes his "leap of faith" to God as a solution. Kierkegaard, says Camus, was looking to "cure" the absurd—Camus wants to find a way to live with it.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lev Chestov – Chestov (Shestov) is a 19th/20th century a Russian existentialist philosopher.

Karl Jaspers – Jaspers is a 19th/20th century Swiss-German philosopher who is loosely considered to be an existentialist (though he rejected the term himself).

Edmund Husserl – Husserl is a 19th/20th century German philosopher who founded the school of phenomenology, which is the study/philosophy of human experience and structures of consciousness in relation to the world and its objects and sensations.

Pluto – Pluto is the Latinized name of the classical god Hades and is the ruler of the underworld. Sisyphus angers him, most likely for putting Death in chains.

Mercury – Mercury is a Roman god, tasked by Pluto to retrieve Sisyphus from the earth and bring him back to the underworld.

Heidegger A German philosopher who is generally considered to be one of the most important 20th century philosophers.

THEMES

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ABSURDISM AND MEANING

Absurdism is often mischaracterized as solely the idea that life is inherently meaningless—and while that is undoubtedly an important aspect of absurdism, it isn't the whole story. Camus specifically defines absurdism as the confrontation between two key elements: on the one hand, there is humankind's "wild longing for clarity," meaning, and "order." On the other hand, people find nothing in the world that gives evidence of answering this search for meaning—life's biggest questions are answered only by the "unreasonable silence of the world." From the beginning of the book, Camus suggests that the fact of death robs life of meaning. He characterizes this as "the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering." For Camus, figuring out whether it's possible to live with full knowledge of life's absence of meaning is the most important philosophical question of all (or if suicide is the only viable option). Camus debates various responses to the "absurd" before deciding that all are inadequate and that, ultimately, the only response is to accept meaninglessness as part of life and to simply live "as much" as possible.

Camus believes that the absurd is often suppressed by habit. That is, people live their lives habitually and use the noise of day-to-day existence to drown out the difficult question of why they live in the first place: "Rising, streetcar, 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." *The Myth of Sisyphus*, then, argues that absurdism is a fact of life. Camus' project, once this fact is established, is to figure out if there is a way of embracing—rather than suppressing—the absurd.

Before Camus offers his idea of the best responses, he strives to show the other most common strategies for "eluding" the absurd. All of these, for him, fall short—they seek to deny the absurd, to falsely characterize it, or ignore it all together. One possible response to the absurd is suicide; Camus believes that answering whether acknowledgement of the absurdity of life necessitates suicide is a question that precedes all others. He argues that suicides can happen because of an individual's conviction that life has no meaning—but paradoxically, that there are other times when people commit suicide precisely to defend the meaning that life has for them. For instance, this kind of suicide could be the result of an individual's commitment to a political cause, or the intensity of their love for someone that has left them. With absurdity, reasons Camus, comes ultimate freedom—life's actions are meaningless, and so the character of these actions is entirely up to an individual to decide. Suicide, then, is not a true solution to the absurd because it does not embrace this freedom. Neither, claims Camus, do the other common strategies. Hope, for example, only hides the absurd in promises of a better future. Likewise, people use the promise of an afterlife to deny the absurd, but religion depends upon a false leap of faith that is not rational—and in not being rational, it constitutes a kind of trick. For Camus, then, the usual responses to absurdity—the conflict between the desire for meaning and reason with the world's inability to satisfy it—are wholly inadequate.

Camus doesn't offer a definite "answer" to the absurd—it's not a dilemma that people should try to solve because it is inherently unsolvable. For Camus, any possible accommodation of the absurd thus depends upon incorporating it into an individual's existence without either reducing or oversimplifying its function. He sees the acknowledgement of the absurd as an understanding that humankind cannot get any genuine answers that solve the question of the meaning of life. In this case, reasons Camus, no experience of life is inherently more meaningful than any other—people should strive for "as much" living as possible. They should revolt against the absurd by, paradoxically, always admitting its presence.

This, in theory, plays out in giving as much value to one experience as another, and not deferring any aspect of life for some promise of a better future: "The absurd man can only

drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance." Camus thus argues for a switch in mindset from qualitative—in which man assesses his life according to the quality of his experiences—to a quantitative outlook: a question of more or less experience. Camus' shift towards a quantitative outlook is undoubtedly problematic because it smuggles within it a qualitative judgment, presupposing what counts as "more" living and what counts as "less." There is no definitive, rational way to prove whether, for example, going outside is "more experience" than sitting inside and staring at every fraction of the walls. The reader might well ask whether doing "more" in a day equates to more experience, and question whether quantity works as a response to the absurd.

HUMANKIND AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The Myth of Sisyphus poses a dilemma that goes to the heart of what it means to be alive. While people strive to create good lives for themselves, the inevitability of death renders this effort—according to Camus—ultimately meaningless. This tension between the human desire for logic and meaning and the world's refusal to conform to that desire is the central idea of the book, a concept Camus deems "absurdism." As a key part of his exploration of absurdism—especially in an effort to answer whether, in the fact of life's meaninglessness, people should just commit suicide—Camus looks closely at the relationship between humankind and the natural world. For Camus, the natural world embodies the absurd; furthermore, the complicated relationship between man and nature even makes life more absurd. Camus sees this fundamentally as a conflict: nature's might and longevity make a kind of mockery of human life by virtue of comparison. To make matters worse, nature is not consciously involved in this problem—again undermining mankind's desire to make sense of the world.

Camus essentially accuses nature of acting as a kind of passive aggressor towards humanity, suggesting that it mocks the way in which individuals long for meaning in a world in which they exist for a mere moment. The natural world is a symbol of the passage of time—and the shortness of human life. Instead of offering people solace from the meaninglessness of life, then, the natural world actively intensifies it: "At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia." The immensity of the natural world, Camus suggests, makes human beings seem all the more inconsequential. This is an expressly temporal (that is, time-based) problem. The natural world—the stars, the sea, and so on—represents lengths of time that make human life seem insignificant, heightening the sense that life has no meaning because it is destined to turn to dust—soon. This gives the natural world a "denseness" and "strangeness" that, to Camus, represents the absurd.

With the fact of death making the quest for meaning in life a fundamentally absurd one, nature takes on an antagonistic quality by acting as a constant reminder of humankind's mortality. Camus believes that nature further heightens the sense of absurdity in life because the natural world is one of the main sites of humankind's efforts to explain reality—an explanation, Camus argues, that can never truly be achieved. Humankind, says Camus, has a desire to rationally understand its world. Nature intoxicates mankind—"these scents of grass and stars at night"—which gives rise to an attempt to understand it. That is, humans seek to apply their rational longing to their environment in order to make sense of it. This longing to understand nature finds its greatest expression in science. But, says Camus, science can only ever describe nature—it can't ultimately explain the meaning of nature's existence. That is, it to an extent can answer the question of "how," but not the puzzle of "why."

Though science brings a certain level of satisfaction to this rational desire to understand nature—"[Science] take[s] apart its mechanisms and my hope increases"—Camus believes there always comes a point when science fails. This point, says Camus, comes when science, having done the work of seemingly explaining much about the workings of the natural world, falls back on descriptive imagery in order to do its "explaining." Explanation is, ultimately, reduced to description. The main example that he gives is that of the atom. Here, argues Camus, science attempts to explain nature by using "hypothesis" and "poetry": specifically, the image of "an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus." This ultimately undermines the professed certainty that science brings to the natural world, which, remains fundamentally dissatisfying to the rational longing of humankind. As with the temporal problem, the impossibility of answering the question of the meaning of life is intrinsic to the natural world. According to Camus, rather than represent mankind's ability to explain nature, the inevitable failure of this project comes to demonstrate the absurdity of the human dilemma itself—the longing for explanation, understanding, and meaning versus the ultimate failure of the natural world to adequately answer that call.

MASCULINITY

Once he has established his definition of the absurd, Camus seeks to provide the reader with examples—which he says, categorically, are not models—of the "absurd man." That is, he offers up figures who,

in his opinion, take on the absurd and incorporate it into their lives, particularly with the aim of seeking out "more" (as opposed to "better") experiences. But in this chapter, as with the rest of the book, there's a notable absence of women and female perspectives. The reliance on more traditionally masculine modes of living as responses to the absurd may be suggestive of the biases of the time, but also arguably undermines what Camus sees as valid "revolts" against the specifically universal problem of the absurd. Camus unwittingly reinforces the idea that masculine viewpoints are neutral and universal viewpoints, and in doing so demonstrates their limitations.

Though the book does not claim masculinity as an intended theme within its pages, the almost complete absence of women is problematic for Camus' attempts to develop an appropriate response to the absurd. The reliance on masculine stereotypes seems to ignore the experience of half of the human race. Thereby Camus' suggested response to a problem he claims is universal makes that supposed universality less logically rigorous. While it's important to consider that Camus published the essay in 1942 when gender roles were undoubtedly different from today, the book rarely mentions women at all. In his discussions of life and humanity, Camus always refers to "man" and "mankind"; while this tendency is quite standard for the time, it is also suggestive of the gendered responses to the absurd that Camus outlines in the book. Furthermore, the definition of the Sisyphean nature of man's everyday existence—which Camus outlines as "Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep"—is distinctly male. A more thorough account of the question of life's meaning, or lack of, would have to incorporate the types of unseen labor that have tended to be the lot of womankind over the previous centuries: child-rearing, domestic work and so on. Camus' book, then, has a glaring flaw from the off—an unconscious dismissal of the experiences of roughly half of the world's population.

Masculine stereotypes are foregrounded most strongly in the "The Absurd Man" chapter of the book. Here, having developed his notion of the absurd in the preceding chapters, Camus aims to give his reader some examples of lives that have been lived with "courage and reasoning" in the face of meaninglessness—all of which are about men. The first of these is Don Juan, a legendary libertine and seducer from the world of fiction (first mentioned in *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest* around 1630). In all versions of the Don Juan story, his powers of seduction are second to none, and he takes great pride in these abilities. Camus praises the character, arguing that he expresses the idea that, in the face of the absurd, an individual should strive for "more" living rather than "better" (because the idea of value is undermined by the meaninglessness of life). In Don Juan, more living equates to more women. His way of loving is described by Camus in terms of conquest and wealth: "But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest." In this formula, then, women are something to be satisfied and conquered in as great a quantity as possible. This apparent division between the genders suggests that men and women's lives are lived on different planes of existence. Arguably, this undermines the thesis that absurdism is the ubiquitous reality that ties all of humankind together—this answer to absurdism is particularly male. The reader can't know whether this strategy of living "more" is open to women or not because they are marginalized by its very set-up. The reader, then, might wonder whether Camus' example here perhaps represents more of an unconscious bias: as he was a notorious seducer, perhaps his admiration of Don Juan is rooted more in his own womanizing than the rigorous application of the logic of the absurd.

The reader will also notice that Camus' other examples of the absurd individual seem unquestionably weighted towards masculinity (or the clichés of what it is to be masculine). Camus sees these—as with Don Juanism—as embodying his principles of revolt, freedom, and passion in relation to everyday life. Camus praises the conqueror-figure, whom he believes lives to have an impact on history rather than deferring living for a future that never arrives. The conqueror, of course, represents stereotypically masculine traits of aggression and violence. Sisyphus, too, is linked to ideas of masculine strength. He bears the burden of his **rock** with muscular physicality and elicits sympathy from the gods when he insists he needs to chastise his wife. In the quiet way that he bears his burden, Sisyphus chimes with the idea that men should not talk about their predicaments as opposed to seeing the ability to acknowledge weakness as a kind of strength. Camus, then, only uses predominantly male examples throughout his book. The reader might take these figures as representative of women too, but their specific, stereotypically masculine character makes it difficult to do so. Women only appear as passive participants in the lives of men—leaving the reader to wonder how the absurd relates specifically to their lives too.

PHILOSOPHY AND ART

Camus implores his readers not to try to eliminate the absurd, but rather to bring it into daily life as an ever-present reality. Philosophy, the book argues, has so far been incapable of doing so because, though capable of *diagnosing* the absurd, its practitioners have relied on illogical leaps of faith to try to "solve" it. Art, on the other hand, plays a more tangibly useful role because it can help provide examples of the absurdity of life without the extra (irrational) stage of seeking a resolution.

Camus is keen to stress that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is categorically not philosophy. Philosophy is portrayed throughout the essay as an intellectual activity that has

sometimes touched on the absurd, but always fallen short of responding appropriately. Camus characterizes philosophy as fundamentally reliant on self-constructed systems that implicitly claim to explain the world; Camus strives to be anti-systematic and keep the world unexplained. Camus believes this to be important as there is a question more pertinent and urgent than any of philosophy's considerations—that is, whether the absurdity of life necessitates the act of suicide. Philosophy, as Camus admits, has certainly tried to address these concerns—but even the greatest philosophers are guilty of committing "philosophical suicide." That is, while philosophers like Heidegger, Jaspers, Chestov, Kierkegaard, and Husserl did manage to identify the absurdity of life, they each, in their own way, were too afraid to accommodate it. Instead, they relied on some extra element to *resolve* the absurd—a leap of faith. Kierkegaard, for example, takes humankind's inability to truly understand the world as proof of its irrationality, which he in turn uses as evidence of God's existence.

Camus, then, fills *The Myth of Sisyphus* with references to philosophy while also claiming its failures. This works as a device for him to differentiate his ideas of the absurd with those of other writers, allowing him to position his absurdism as somehow beyond the realm of philosophy. It's up to the reader how effective Camus is in this regard—whether this positioning of the absurd is accurate or represents an avoidance of philosophical inquiry. It's also worth noting that this strategy allows Camus to bring in certain ideas under the radar, without having to hold them up to great scrutiny. For example, the concept of the "soul" is a given throughout *The Myth of Sisyphus*, its existence never questioned as it might be in a more explicitly "philosophical" essay.

Camus sees more use for art than philosophy, turning to literature to investigate whether it can be more effective in accommodating the absurd (not falsely "solving" it). Implicit within this turn is the suggestion that art has something to offer that is lacking in philosophy. Early in the book, Camus hints that "Perhaps we shall be able to overtake that elusive feeling of absurdity in the different but closely related worlds of intelligence, of the art of living, or of art itself." That is, perhaps, art, in tandem with a particular way of living and thinking can help individuals accommodate the absurd in their everyday lives. After dismissing the philosophers of the past for their leaps of faith (while admitting their ability to demonstrate the absurd), Camus turns to writers like the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Shakespeare, and Franz Kafka for an alternative.

Literature (and art more generally), so Camus' theory goes, can incorporate specific examples of the absurd into its world without feeling the need to necessarily *explain* them. As an example, Camus cites the character of Kirilov in Dostoevsky' *The Possessed*. Kirilov commits a so-called "logical suicide," tied up in the idea that life is either worth living because there is life after death or it is entirely meaningless. Kirilov can't bring himself to make the leap to belief in God, and so kills himself. His last words are "all is well." Camus, here, isn't advocating suicide, but looking at the way in which art can accommodate the absurd by showing examples of its function in everyday life. Art can embody the absurd, without feeling the need to *solve* it—unlike philosophy. Finally, Kirilov's example is doubly good in Camus' opinion because of the way the character approaches his death. His comment that "all is well" represents the ultimate acceptance of the absurd and is what Camus feels is necessary on a day-to-day basis. That is, the absurd should never be let out of sight and instead ought to be welcomed into the fabric of life. "All is well," then, is a dictum for every day—up to and including death.

Camus, then, asks his readers to weigh art and philosophy side by side, to investigate how they differ in their ability to provide humankind with an effective strategy for living with the absurd, which he believes is the most important philosophical problem of all. Perhaps his wider argument that art responds to the absurd better than philosophy is useful for interpreting *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a whole: to view it as a work of literature, accommodating the absurd, rather than an answer.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SISYPHUS' ROCK

Sisyphus' rock represents mankind's absurd dilemma, which is ultimately impossible to resolve—that is, that mankind longs for reason and meaning in the world, but the world refuses to answer that longing. Sisyphus was a Greek mortal condemned by the gods for angering them. His punishment was to push a rock up a mountain, only for it to roll back down again once at the top. For eternity, his task is to keep pushing that rock again and again. This irresolvable conflict is embodied in Sisyphus's Rock—each time he gets it to the top, it falls back down again. Likewise, whenever man comes close to realizing the meaning of life, it quickly becomes apparent that he was mistaken. The rock can thus be taken as symbolic of mankind's endeavor—arduous but ultimately fruitless. The rock also emphasizes the materiality of the world, which, especially in nature, seems to make a mockery of mankind's desire for meaning. Camus' statement that life is meaningless is dependent upon the shortness of an individual's life, and the longer time scales represented by the natural world—the ocean, the sky, or in this case, a great rock—are physical reminders of the inevitability of death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1991.

1. Absurdity and Suicide Quotes

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This is Camus' opening of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He perceives the problem of the absurd—humankind's longing for meaning in a world that refuses to grant it—as the most urgent problem of all. That's because the loss of meaning in life sometimes leads people to commit suicide; no other philosophical problem has the same life-or-death effect. This extends to all intellectual thought—the problem of whether or not life is worth living precedes all other concerns, because failure to answer it makes any other philosophical inquiry meaningless. *The Myth of Sisyphus* is thus set up as Camus' attempt to address the problem of suicide—to see if it is possible to live in a meaningless world or if suicide is the logical option.

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. Shades of meaning, contradictions, the psychology that an "objective" mind can always introduce into all problems have no place in this pursuit and this passion. It calls simply for an unjust—in other words, logical—thought. That is not easy. It is always easy to be logical. It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

For Camus, answering the problem of suicide requires a logical rigor like no other. Still early in the book, he allows for the possibility that the absurd "dictates" death; that is, knowledge of the absurdity of life *might* make suicide the only reasonable response. Camus wants to deal with only what he can know for sure and, for him, the only certainty in life is its absurdity. Interestingly, then, Camus at once does away with Rationalist philosophy (by thinkers like René Descartes), which seeks to explain the world using the intellect, while also going further than earlier Rationalist thought by implying that his approach—acknowledging the absurd—represents acknowledging the only rational and tangible truth. Camus, who denies throughout that *The Myth of Sisyphus* is philosophy, wants to find practical ways of living with the absurd in full view—the (unsatisfactory) alternative is suicide.

2. Absurd Walls Quotes

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, street-car, 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.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12-13

Explanation and Analysis

In the "Absurd Walls" section, Camus seeks to show how the absurd entraps people or, likewise, how they imprison themselves in an attempt to hold the absurd at bay. Here, Camus is gesturing towards a kind of everyman—the idea of an "average" person, in this case a male blue-collar or white-collar worker. This life is dictated by routine, a rhythm that is as mundane as it is repetitive. Within this rhythm, suggests Camus, the absurd can creep in, undermining the "why" that makes people get up for work in the morning.

To contextualize this within the early twentieth century, there's no doubt that there was an increasingly routine aspect to the kinds of work Camus describes—factory jobs, for example, were becoming more repetitive and focused on small, menial tasks. This was the product of the increase in mass production, mass consumption and mass labor. What's interesting is that Camus makes no mention of the labor

more typically performed by women—childcare and domestic work. If, as Camus claims, the absurd is a universal condition, then the book falls short in both outlining how this condition manifests in the lives of women and, more importantly, fails to offer "examples" of "successfully" absurd ways of living are open to the human race as a whole—rather than just to the men.

> A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

This quote continues to develop Camus' theories of how absurdity affects people, switching the attention from repetitive labor to the natural world. For Camus, the meaninglessness of life, which is part of the equation that forms the absurd, is contingent on the inevitability of death. That is, the certainty of death is thought to undermine people's wants, cares, dreams, and actions in life. This depends on the idea that if something doesn't last, it isn't meaningful. Camus' theory of absurdity is therefore heavily reliant on the question of time—if, somehow, things did last forever, then *in theory* they would be meaningful. Here, Camus observes this issue of time at play in the natural world. Rocks, hills, the sky, the sea—all of these represent timespans well beyond the small stretch of time that represents an average human life. Nature thus takes on a kind of antagonistic quality, mocking the ephemeral nature of being human. This is what Camus means by "primitive hostility."

> 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. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The end of this section offers up the most succinct description of absurdity so far in the book. The absurd is not, as it is often mischaracterized, merely the meaninglessness of life. Instead, it is a conflict and a confrontation. On the one side is humankind's desire for meaning, logic, and order; on the other, the world's refusal to satisfy this desire. In fact, Camus doesn't even say that the world *refuses* to satisfy this desire—it's just that it patently doesn't (he cites centuries of inconclusive philosophizing as evidence). Mankind and the world are thus "bound" together by the absurd, each depending on the other to make it exist. Camus' task, as he sees it, is to find a way to live that acknowledges the absurdity of life—rather than trying to solve or evade it.

3. Philosophical Suicide Quotes

> Kierkegaard wants to be cured. To be cured is his frenzied wish, and it runs throughout his whole journal. The entire effort of his intelligence is to escape the antinomy of the human condition. An all the more desperate effort since he intermittently perceives its vanity when he speaks of himself, as if neither fear of God nor piety were capable of bringing him to peace. Thus it is that, through a strained subterfuge, he gives the irrational the appearance and God the attributes of the absurd: unjust, incoherent, and incomprehensible. Intelligence alone in him strives to stifle the underlying demands of the human heart. Since nothing is proved, everything can he proved.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), Soren Kierkegaard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Camus considers the work of various philosophers who can be loosely grouped together as "existentialists." Each of them was principally concerned with the meaning of existence. Soren Kierkegaard was an influential Danish philosopher and is widely considered to be the first existentialist. As with the other philosophers in this section, Kierkegaard is praised by Camus for an effective contribution to bringing visibility to the absurd. The absurd, of course, is what Camus believes to be the sole certainty in life. Kierkegaard, in Camus' judgment, was too afraid to live with the absurd and instead tried to escape it. This is where religion came in—the existence of the absurd is taken, paradoxically, as the existence of God. This represents an attempt at being cured; Camus wishes for no such thing.

4. Absurd Freedom Quotes

❝ But at the same time the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty. Thus I could not act otherwise than as the father (or the engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office sub-clerk) that I am preparing to be. I think I can choose to be that rather than something else. I think so unconsciously, to be sure. But at the same time I strengthen my postulate with the beliefs of those around me, with the presumptions of my human environment (others are so sure of being free, and that cheerful mood is so contagious!). However far one may remain from any presumption, moral or social, one is partly influenced by them and even, for the best among them (there are good and bad presumptions), one adapts one' s life to them. Thus the absurd man realizes that he was not really free.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Camus outlines how an individual's realization of the absurd actually constitutes a kind of (absurd) freedom. The quote begins by outlining what Camus sees as the usual way of conceiving the idea of freedom: the ability to choose what to be. This, according to Camus, imprisons people in stereotypes and roles, turning them into actors. For example, a father governs his choices according to what he feels is expected of him as a father. Realizing that these social constraints are the very opposite of freedom—seeing through them—is for Camus a very different type of freedom. The absurd man, realizing the meaninglessness of life, is liberated to be whatever he (truly) wants to be—as long as he doesn't lose sight of the absurd. Later in the book, Camus implies that all that is needed to live an "absurd life" is to remain aware of the absurd. It's unclear, then, why a father couldn't also keep the absurd in mind while at the same time fulfilling his fatherly duties. As with elsewhere in the book, the examples Camus provides here are uniformly male. This raises the question of whether the absurdity that Camus talks about is in itself specific to men, or as universal as Camus seems to claim it to be.

❝ Knowing whether or not one can live without appeal is all that interests me. I do not want to get out of my depth. This aspect of life being given me, can I adapt myself to it? Now, faced with this particular concern, belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality. If I convince myself that this life has no other aspect than that of the absurd, if I feel that its whole equilibrium depends on that perpetual opposition between my conscious revolt and the darkness in which it struggles, 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.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60-61

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of the "Absurd Freedom" section and sets the tone for the following chapter, which aims to provide practical examples of how to live with the absurd in full view. Camus essentially argues that the absurd undermines any value system humans might use to evaluate their experiences—that is, it doesn't matter if what humans experience is "good" because it all ends in the void of death anyway. For this qualitative way of judging life, Camus substitutes a quantitative approach that essentially aims for "more." not "better," experience. This is a logically problematic idea, because it is not easy to assess how experience should be divided into quantities. If it's about a

variety of different experiences, none of the examples that follow of absurd lives make much sense (Don Juan, the conqueror and the actor live habitually repetitive existences).

5. The Absurd Man Quotes

❝ 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 cannot mean for him another life. That would be unfair. I am not even speaking here of that paltry eternity that is called posterity.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Camus aims to give examples of absurd lives—those who live with the absurd in full view, instead of trying to hide from absurdity. This represents his overall introduction to the examples that follow. The absurd man, according to Camus, "does nothing for the eternal"; that is, he does not defer any aspect of his life for some promised future or afterlife. The short timespan that represents his own life is the site of his "adventure." Earlier in the book, Camus likens humankind's desire for the world to make sense to a "nostalgia" for unity. "Nostalgia" is an interesting choice of word because it carries with implications of homesickness and tender feelings for the past. Perhaps, then, those who realize the absurd (but can't properly live with it) are nostalgic for the time when the world seemed to have that unity and sense of purpose—this could be considered childhood. In this quote, Camus also reinforces the idea that meaning and time are interlinked; the idea of "posterity" holds no value to him because, in the grand scheme of things, it is still temporary.

6. Don Juanism Quotes

❝ If it were sufficient to love, things would be too easy. The more one loves, the stronger the absurd grows. It is not through lack of love that Don Juan goes from woman to woman. It is ridiculous to represent him as a mystic in quest of total love. But it is indeed because he loves them with the same passion and each time with his whole self that he must repeat his gift and his profound quest. Whence each woman hopes to give him what no one has ever given him. Each time they are utterly wrong and merely manage to make him feel the need of that repetition. "At last," exclaims one of them, "I have given you love." Can we be surprised that Don Juan laughs at this? "At last? No," he says, "but once more." Why should it be essential to love rarely in order to love much?

Related Characters: Don Juan, Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes as Camus gives his first example of an "absurd man," by which he means someone who lives with total awareness of the absurd. Don Juan is a character who appears in numerous works of literature and art (like opera), and represents the male seducer in his "greatest" form. Essentially, Don Juan lives a life in which he jumps from one lover to the next, fitting in as many as he possibly can into his short life and thereby adhering to Camus' suggestion that the absurd life should be governed by quantity and not quality.

There are numerous problems with Don Juan as an example of an absurd life. Firstly, it does little to answer the void at the heart of *The Myth of Sisyphus*—the total lack of consideration of female perspective in relation to the absurd. Women are considered mere recipients of Don Juan's "gift," not people in their own right. Secondly, Camus' description of Don Juan's lifestyle is not actually all that different from that of the office or factory worker earlier: he gets up, goes around, does his business, goes to sleep, repeat. This has an air of habit that does not fit with the idea that habit is an unthinking attempt to suppress the absurd. Finally, if love is something that changes over time, the experience of two people loving one another over a lifetime is no more or less varied, technically speaking, than using the same "pick-up" lines on a number of different women and having lots of similar sexual encounters, as is Don Juan's method.

8. Conquest Quotes

"There is but one luxury for them—that of human relations. How can one fail to realize that in this vulnerable universe everything that is human and solely human assumes a more vivid meaning? Taut faces, threatened fraternity, such strong and chaste friendship among men—these are the true riches because they are transitory."

Related Characters: The Conqueror (speaker), Albert Camus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

This section is spoken in the first person by a conqueror-figure, though they are obviously Camus' ideas. He is outlining the effects of warfare on the meaning of life, and the conqueror is more of a generic soldier or fighter than someone who literally conquers and assumes control of new territory. Essentially, so the logic goes, warfare and conflict heighten an individual's awareness of death and bring him into closer relationship with the absurd. This is in turn makes life seem more full and vibrant. The quote praises "fraternity" and "friendship among men" (the typically male example again sidelines any possibility of a female perspective) as valuable "riches" of life, but only because they are potentially so short-lived. This might well make the reader wonder why, if life is transitory anyway (as is constantly emphasized throughout the book), friendship and community between individuals can't be prized outside of the arena of warfare.

Let me repeat that these images do not propose moral codes and involve no judgments: they are sketches. They merely represent a style of life. The lover, the actor, or the adventurer plays the absurd. But equally well, if he wishes, the chaste man, the civil servant, or the president of the Republic. It is enough to know and to mask nothing.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), The Conqueror, The Actor, Don Juan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of the "Absurd Man" section. It represents something of a get-out clause for Camus; if the reader doesn't agree with his examples of absurd lives, then any other will do fine as an illustrative example. There is no doubt that Camus' choices of Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror as "sketches" of absurd lives have involved "judgments"—these are the types of lives that he deems to be genuine responses to the absurd. Camus, here, adds the paradoxical claim that remaining aware of the absurd—"It is enough to know and to mask nothing"—is sufficient as a response. This seems to undermine both that an absurd life should strive for quantity rather than quality, and that habitual living is one way people too weak to acknowledge the absurd try to hide it.

9. Philosophy and Fiction Quotes

Creating is living doubly [...] Creation is the great mime.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In the "Absurd Creation" chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus sets out why he thinks the creative life is the epitome of living with the absurd. He believes that the world has no inherent meaning and that creators, in building another world in their work, mimic this lack of meaning by creating its double. The creator thus paradoxically embraces the meaninglessness of the world by actively contributing to it. The idea of the artist holding up a mirror to the world stretches all the way back to the Ancient Greeks—the difference for Camus is that the only thing that art can truly reflect is the absurd. Like science, art can describe parts of experience, but not explain existence itself.

The great novelists are philosophical novelists—that is, the contrary of thesis-writers. For instance, Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux, Kafka, to cite but a few.

But in fact the preference they have shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a certain thought that is common to them all, convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance. They consider the work of art both as an end and a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and its consummation. But it is complete only through the implications of that philosophy.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Camus gives a list of some of his literary heroes. According to Camus, they are good writers because their work is not driven by a particular thesis; that is, they do not write a book in order to prove a truth they have already arrived at. This fits well with Camus' principle that art should describe the world but not attempt to explain it (and thereby faithfully render the absurdity of life). The quote also draws the distinction between philosophers and artists: whereas philosophers, in Camus' opinion, are prone to trying to explain away the absurd, artists can show the absurd in motion in people's lives. A good novelist's writing is thus composed of "images" that are formed by ideas free from the pressure of needing to be fully resolved.

10. Kirilov Quotes

All of Dostoevsky's heroes question themselves as to the meaning of life. In this they are modern: they do not fear ridicule. What distinguishes modern sensibility from classical sensibility is that the latter thrives on moral problems and the former on metaphysical problems. In Dostoevsky's novels the question is propounded with such intensity that it can only invite extreme solutions. Existence is illusory *or* it is eternal. If Dostoevsky were satisfied with this inquiry, he would be a philosopher. But he illustrates the consequences that such intellectual pastimes may have in a man's life, and in this regard he is an artist.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), Kirilov, Fyodor Dostoevsky

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In the "Kirilov" section of the book, Camus examines one particular character from Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* in relation to the absurd. Kirilov epitomizes what Camus thinks is good about art: he is an example of the absurd at play within an individual's life, giving concrete context to a problem too often masked by abstraction (like from philosophers). Camus praises Dostoevsky for bringing Kirilov's absurd dilemma to life, which can be summarized as this: Kirilov feels that God is needed in order for life to be meaningful, but can't bring himself to believe in God. He therefore sense that *he* is the master of his will, and kills himself to demonstrate this (and that death is nothing to be afraid of). Good art, then, can show how the absurd actually interacts with an individual's life.

11. Ephemeral Creation Quotes

Any thought that abandons unity glorifies diversity. And diversity is the home of art. The only thought to liberate the mind is that which leaves it alone, certain of its limits and of its impending end. No doctrine tempts it. It awaits the ripening of the work and of life. Detached from it, the work will once more give a barely muffled voice to a soul forever freed from hope. Or it will give voice to nothing if the creator, tired of his activity, intends to turn away. That is equivalent.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In the final section of "Absurd Creation," Camus sums up his thoughts about art and the absurd. Because there is no unifying theory of the world that can help people make sense of it, art should avoid trying to provide something similar. Instead, art is free to describe any part of experience in detail, thereby reveling in the richness of the world without pretending that there is any lasting meaning behind it. Art should strive to render the "diversity" of experience, instead of trying to resolve the world into a unified whole. Likewise, if the artist decides not to make this work, that is considered by Camus as equally valuable overall to making it. The paradox of art's value as presented here intentionally

mimics the paradox of life itself: the desire for meaning versus the inability to truly find it.

12. The Myth of Sisyphus Quotes

To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), Pluto, Sisyphus

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the last chapter of the book, in which Camus discusses the myth of Sisyphus itself—until now the relevance of the book's title has not been made clear. As Camus notes, there are varying stories attached to the Greek myth of the mortal named Sisyphus, but his eventual fate is condemnation by the gods. This condemnation takes the form of eternal and futile labor: pushing a rock up a mountain, only for it to roll down again, forcing Sisyphus to start the process all over again. Camus thinks of Sisyphus as the ultimate "absurd hero" because his labor is both meaningless and eternal; he is representative of man's fruitless struggle for meaning in the world.

However, bearing in mind that Camus has earlier described the "absurd man" as one who constantly embraces life's absurdity, it's questionable whether Sisyphus quite fits his position in Camus' book. Here, Sisyphus puts death in chains and thereby temporarily holds back death from the world. If life's meaninglessness is dependent on the inevitability of death, the reader might consider whether Sisyphus' attempts to stave death off actually represent an attempt to welcome meaning into the world. Either way, this gives the reader a sense of why the gods, especially Pluto, were so angry with Sisyphus.

Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, led him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), Pluto, Sisyphus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time in Sisyphus' story that he is sent to the underworld. When he died, he craftily convinced his wife not to bury him properly and thereby give him the possibility of the convincing the gods to approve his return to the earth. As with elsewhere in the book, the woman of the story is not considered a valid or informative perspective. What's noticeable here is how much Sisyphus' enjoyment of the world depends on its natural beauty which, it should be remembered, is the product of an extremely unlikely equilibrium of various elements. Sisyphus, then, doesn't seem to be longing for the absurd—he finds solace in nature, not antagonism. Eventually, of course, this incurs the wrath of the gods and results in Sisyphus' eternal fate. Perhaps there is something comically cruel about the gods' choice of labor for Sisyphus, the rock representing the earthly beauty that he can no longer access.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

Related Characters: Albert Camus (speaker), Sisyphus

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

This quote concludes *The Myth of Sisyphus*. It ascribes certain feelings to Sisyphus that can't be ascertained from the myth itself—it's just as possible that Sisyphus decides that all is *not* well. Furthermore, it's not clear how his fate negates the gods given that it is precisely the fate that they have assigned to him. Camus sees Sisyphus' redemption—if it can even be called that—in the moments when Sisyphus descends the mountain to start his labor all over again. This represents a pause for reflection, in which Sisyphus can presumably accept his fate by being conscious of it. Camus also highlights the materiality of the world at this point, imagining Sisyphus knowing his rock intimately through his eternal and futile labor. The final sentence contains a key word that gives the reader pause: "imagine." Camus has been keen to stress throughout that the absurd man must do away with any illusions in life—it might then be said that "imagining" Sisyphus happy, with no way of verifying this as fact, becomes a kind of hope or illusion in itself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

1. AN ABSURD REASONING: ABSURDITY AND SUICIDE

Camus states that there is one philosophical problem that takes precedence over all others: suicide. Suicide is inseparable from the meaning of life, and investigating this question comes before any other concerns, whether they be about ontology or science. Furthermore, people kill themselves sometimes because life seems meaningless, and other times because they have meaning that they wish to defend. The meaning of life, then, is the most urgent question.

Suicide is the most urgent philosophical problem, for Camus, because its consequences are literally a matter of life and death. No one, he reasons, has ever killed themselves over mathematics or geometry. It's not a straightforward equation between life's meaninglessness and the act of suicide: some people might kill themselves for a political cause or because their love is gone—in other words, because life does *have meaning.*

Camus speaks of the difficulty of truly understanding the act of suicide. While for some the act of committing suicide might be the result of "personal sorrows" or "incurable illness," it could also be that merely having a bad day opens up latent feelings of self-destruction.

Essentially, the act of suicide cuts an individual off from being properly understood by others. Because the person is no longer around to explain their actions, people hypothesize.

Suicide, says Camus, is an admission that life is "not worth the trouble." Much of living is done by habit, and suicide represents a realization that this habit lacks any meaning. Camus likens this feeling to one of "exile." The feeling of a divorce between man and his life represents "absurdity." He states that his essay is chiefly concerned with the "relationship between the absurd and suicide"—whether the latter is truly a solution to the former.

Camus agrees with the idea that life has no inherent meaning. His essay, then, represents his attempt to question whether, in light of this knowledge, the only logical thing to do is commit suicide. Important to note here (as is reiterated throughout), is that the absurd is not solely life's lack of meaning—it is the conflict between humankind's longing for meaning and the world's inability to provide a satisfactory response.

Camus argues that it is too simplistic to think that there are only two answers to the absurd: suicide or living. Most people go on living, while still questioning the meaning of life. Furthermore, suicide can be committed by people who believe in the meaning of life and, vice versa, some people live within the belief that life is meaningless.

Camus is looking for a third way: a mode of living that unflinchingly incorporates the absurd into daily life.

The most common way of "eluding" the absurd, says Camus, is through "hope"—hope that something better is on the way in the future. Camus sees mankind as fundamentally confused about life, making the issue of its absurdity the prime concern above all others. He vows to pursue this issue in order to see if it's possible to live with the absurd.

Camus sees hope as fundamentally irrational, because it defers confrontation with the absurd long into the future. For example, people might put up with dissatisfaction in their lives because they believe one day it will be better. This is not an effective strategy, in Camus' opinion.

2. AN ABSURD REASONING: ABSURD WALLS

Camus begins this section by talking about feelings. "Great feelings," he says, constitute "their own universe" and govern those that feel them. The feeling of absurdity can "strike any man in the face." Though feelings are not easy to analyze, it is possible to discuss their practical effects and consequences.

People usually first encounter the absurd as a feeling, telling them that what they value is actually meaningless. Camus does not seek to explain that feeling exactly, but to examine the way it practically affects people.

Camus outlines how the feeling of absurdity can crop up at any time in life, "when the stage-sets collapse." Most people live their lives according to rhythm and habit—waking, working (Camus' example is factory work), eating, and sleeping—and this weariness sometimes brings about a sense of the absurd.

Life, for Camus, is mostly an illusion lived out habitually and without thinking. People find a rhythm to life and stick with it. Camus' example here is distinctly male—a pattern that will continue throughout the book—as he fails to consider the type of unseen labor done by women in the home.

Furthermore, says Camus, most people's lives are "unillustrious" and carried onward by a sense of the future—people use the promise of "tomorrow" to silence the absurdity of today. But people reach a certain stage when they can sense their "relation to time," and that longing for tomorrow is a falsehood.

At some point as people age, reasons Camus, the promise of tomorrow begins to ring hollow. This is a distinctly temporal (time-related) sensation, as individuals feel themselves too far along the arc of their own lives for whatever comes to make up for whatever has already been.

For Camus, nature only serves to make the problem of the absurd worse. Its "beauty" contains something "inhuman," especially in the way that the natural world works on different timeframes to humankind. This results in a "denseness' and "strangeness" that "rises up to face us across millennia."

Nature intensifies the temporal aspect of the absurd. Its timescales—that of a cliff face, for example—make human life seem pitifully short, and in turn make human cares seem small and insignificant. Camus likens this to a kind of "density"—a density of existence in relation to time, perhaps.

Even people's gestures, says Camus, can bring about an awareness of the absurd, their "mechanical aspect" creating a "meaningless pantomime."

People perform the absurd, just as they perform their daily lives. The "pantomime" image suggests a staged performance of heightened gesture, but with frivolous meaning.

Camus states that "there is no experience of death," because people can only experience what comes through consciousness. Other people's deaths are just a substitute that don't really teach much. With these "facts" in mind, asks Camus, should people "die voluntarily" or "hope in spite of everything?"

Camus sees death as the key factor behind the meaninglessness of life, but he never asks why, in order for something to be meaningful, it would need to last forever. This reliance on a kind of temporal eternity—which, by Camus' logic, is the only route to "meaningfulness"—is curiously similar to the position held by those he criticizes: people who live in hope of the future, or those with a religious devotion to an eternal afterlife.

These previous encounters with absurd occur on the plane of "experience," says Camus. He turns his attention to the "plane of the intelligence." The mind, he says, has "a nostalgia for unity"—"to understand is to unify." But the world is plural and made out of differences, refusing to conform to the human desire for unity.

Nostalgia ("nostalgie" in French) is an interesting word choice on Camus' part. It has distinct connotations of longing for home or the past. Perhaps childhood represents a time without an awareness of the absurd, and thereby the kind of "nostalgia for unity" that Camus refer to—a time and place when things in which things make unified sense.

Camus takes the view that people can only truly know their immediate sensory world: the rest is a "construction." "There are truths," he says, "but no truth." Science tries to explain the world, but it can only ever describe it—it can answer the question of *how*, but not of *why*.

Camus' distinction between "truths" and "truth" equates to a division between the ability to describe how things work in the world versus the inability to answer why the world exists in the first place.

For Camus, then, the intellect can only confirm that "this world is absurd." The many attempts of humankind to "explain everything are enough to make a decent man laugh." Camus defines the absurd as being specifically the confrontation between man's "wild longing for clarity" and "the irrational" nature of the world.

Camus does not exactly seek to do away with rationalism (a philosophical movement spearheaded by thinkers like René Descartes, who believed the intellect could make sense of the world). Instead, he wants to practice a more extreme rationalism, one in which individuals understand that the only certainty in life is that it has no meaning. The absurd is defined very specifically as the clash between mankind's desire for meaning and reason with the world's refusal to satisfy it.

Camus touches on previous thinkers who have tried to acknowledge the irrationality of life. Writers like Jaspers, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Chestov managed to correctly identify the absurdity of life, such as Heidegger's "anxiety" or what Jaspers sees as the "flaw" in spiritual and religious ways of life: "everlasting nothingness."

The thinkers Camus cites are generally considered to be existentialists, who aim to confront the fact that life seems to have no inherent meaning in and of itself. Camus praises their ability to describe the meaninglessness of life, though considers them to all to have a fatal flaw.

Camus says Chestov noted that "the most universal rationalism always stumbles on the irrational of human thought." Kierkegaard, for his part, was able to "live" in the absurd for part of his life. This allowed him to dive into the "spiritual adventure" of his "beloved scandals."

To a degree, Kierkegaard mirrors the later example that Camus uses of the "absurd man"—Don Juan, a serial seducer. As with all the philosophers mentioned in this section, in the next chapter Camus will explain why they fail in the face of the absurd.

The phenomenologist, Husserl, tried to "reinstate the world in its diversity and deny the transcendent power of the reason." This, says Camus, made thinking about "learning all over again" to experience sensory input. Camus in part admires the above thinkers for their acknowledgment of the absurd. He offers another succinct definition: "the absurd is born[e] of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."

Phenomenology is the study of experience and consciousness, a movement spearheaded by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century. The absurd is again defined as a kind of antagonism—not merely the idea that life is meaningless.

3. AN ABSURD REASONING: PHILOSOPHICAL SUICIDE

Camus further develops the idea of the absurd, describing it as the disconnect between "an action and the world that transcends it." For example, a swordsman trying to take on numerous men with guns commits "an absurd act." The absurd element is not the swordsman himself, or the other men, but the confrontation between the two—the absurd is the tension between the two.

Camus' example here is more of a metaphor for the absurd itself than a specifically absurd act—this is the only point in the book in which Camus tries to pinpoint specifically absurd occurrences. As with all examples in the book—and with his constant reference to "man" and "mankind"—Camus does not try to grapple with any examples more relevant to the female sex.

For Camus, the absurd is the only knowable fact of life. Any response to life, therefore, must not try to "conjure" the absurd away. This struggle implies three key consequences: "a total absence of hope…a continual rejection…and a conscious dissatisfaction."

Camus isn't necessarily saying that religion and philosophy have thus far been wrong, but that they depend specifically on things that they can't possibly know for sure. The absurd is the only surety, and therefore, in keeping with a sense of extreme rationality, any response to life must hold on to this one fact.

Camus says that anyone who "becomes conscious of the absurd is for ever bound to it" and no longer belongs "to the future." He states that he will analyze how, using "odd reasoning," the philosophers mentioned in the previous chapter all tried to escape the absurd—instead of finding a way to accommodate it.

There is no going back from the absurd, once it has been acknowledged, without some kind of falsity or self-deception. Camus wants to see if there is a way to live in full view of the absurd—incorporating it into daily life without trying to "solve" it.

Camus starts with Karl Jaspers, who he says tries to solve the absurd by employing an illogical leap towards "transcendence"—he takes the absence of "explanation" to irrationally prove the existence of "the unthinkable unity of the general and the particular." This, says Camus, creates a "false god" out of the absurd.

Jaspers, the German-Swiss philosopher, advocates a "pure consciousness of absolute Being." Everything in the world is united by its mere fact of existence, which he in turn interprets as a transcendental quality. For Camus, this is not knowable and therefore represents an escape from the absurd.

Camus moves on to Lev Chestov. Chestov, claims Camus, equates the absurd with God; man is capable of dealing with everything rational, but needs God to help deal with the point at which "human judgment sees no solution." This frustrates Camus, who does not feel that absurdity should become "eternity's springboard"—this is irrational.

For Russian philosopher Lev Chestov (more commonly spelled Shestov), irrationality is an escape route from the absurd. The very fact that rationality can find no solution to the absurd dictates that something beyond human reason becomes mankind's salvation. Camus vehemently disagrees with the absurd being a route to God.

Camus says that his criticism of Chestov is even more relevant to the work of Soren Kierkegaard. Kiekegaard does not seek to keep the absurd in full view, but wants to be "cured" of it by faith. Camus instead wants to find a way of "living in that state of the absurd."

Camus wants to find a way to make the absurd a part of everyday existence. The philosophers mentioned so far have been accurate enough to discern the absurd, but the implied criticism is that they were too scared to incorporate the absurd into their lives.

Moving on to phenomenologists like Husserl, Camus claims that this branch of philosophy initially chimes with the acknowledgment of the absurd because it tries to describe "experience" rather than the world itself. Consciousness becomes a kind of receiver of images, rather than understanding.

Description, rather than explanation, is one thing that Camus believes people can *do in light of the absurd. He draws this out further in the "Absurd Creation" section of the book. Description, too, is the limitation of science when it comes to the natural world.*

But Husserl treats these encounters with the world as being "essences," leading to what Camus calls "an abstract polytheism." Phenomenologists imply that "everything is privileged"; Camus feels this creates a false sense of divine presence in the world.

Every object in the world, goes Camus' critique of Husserl, becomes a kind of god, a pure essence of itself. Camus sees this divinity as an extra step, beyond the knowledge of life's absurdity, and thereby invalid as a response to the absurd.

All of the above philosophies fail, in Camus' opinion, because they see the absurd as something that needs to be solved. Camus' point is that the absurd needs to be lived with in an active and rational manner. He wants to know whether it's possible to live with the absurd, or if "logic commands one to die of it."

Here, Camus reiterates his overall point: he wants to find a way of living in full view of the absurd, not escaping it.

4. AN ABSURD REASONING: ABSURD FREEDOM

Camus reiterates that there are only two "certainties" in life: "my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle." To address the absurd, says Camus, man must live in constant knowledge of these facts. He believes that this constitutes a kind of freedom, in which man can live "*solely* with what he knows."

In essence, someone who lives with the absurd in full view wins for themselves a kind of freedom—that is, freedom from false hope and beliefs. This skepticism stems back to previous rationalist philosophy, but is distinguished by maintaining that there is only one truth: the absurd.

Camus returns to the issue of suicide, stating that the problem has now been "reversed." Living with the absurd means embracing it fully, not escaping it; self-annihilation (suicide) is merely a means of escape, in much the same way that hope is a way of sidestepping the absurd. Instead of suicide, man should "revolt" against the absurd by living with "the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it."

Suicide would constitute an elimination of absurd freedom, and therefore is not a rational solution. Camus ironically aligns suicide and hope here, which seem like polar opposite responses to life, but he illustrates how they're both ways of dodging the reality at hand—that life is absurd and meaningless.

Camus believes this "revolt" of living with the absurd restores "majesty" and "value" to life. The man who can live with the absurd, says Camus, must "drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself."

There is a slight contradiction in Camus' line of thinking here. The absurd is meant to represent a destruction of any value system, but Camus seems to associate living with the absurd as fundamentally better than eluding it.

Camus examines the notion of "freedom" in relation to the absurd. Before a man confronts the absurd, says Camus, he lives his life as if he were free by "thinking of the future, establishing aims for [himself], having preferences." All of these are undermined by the certainty of death.

Camus thus argues for the replacement of a freedom in service of tomorrow (that is, having goals and "preferences" for the future) with a freedom in service of today, since death is inevitable.

For Camus, the false idea of freedom that makes people "choose" what they want to be in life actually restricts them. He cites being a "father…engineer or the leader of a nation, or the post-office sub-clerk"—all of these occupations make a person conform to what is expected of the role. The absurd man, says Camus, "*realizes* that he *was* not really free." Living with full, unflinching knowledge of absurdism thus constitutes the only possible freedom: the rejection of the old illusions of freedom.

Camus argues that people make a false choice of what they want "to be" (for example, a politician) which then typecasts them in habitual ways of living that undermine the absurdity of life. Knowing that life is meaningless—and fully accepting that—provides a more genuine freedom shorn of illusion. Once again, the examples Camus provides are predominantly masculine—the restrained lives he draws upon include a father, engineer, clerk, and political leader.


Camus perceives that living with the absurd necessitates a shift in an individual's attitude towards their experiences. They should, he says, strive for quantity of experience rather than quality (because all ways of evaluating quality are undermined by the certainty of death). "What counts," he asserts, "is not the best living but the most living." This means living with full awareness of the absurd as much of the time as possible (rather than simply living longer).

This is a key principle of Camus' thinking and his suggested response to the absurd. In Camus' view, people should shift from living their lives qualitatively to quantitively, striving not for "better" experience but "more" experience. An obvious problem here is how it is possible to quantify experience—any system that might show that one life experiences more than another seems likely to rely on a qualitative judgment at some stage.

Camus argues that the absurd man sees life as "the present and the succession of presents," illuminated by his determination not to let the absurd out of his sight. The absurd man doesn't defer the moment for the future, and therefore engages the present with the "passionate flames of human revolt."

Here, Camus' thinking is oddly in anticipation of New Age philosophy and self-help texts, which stress the importance of "living in the moment."

Ultimately, Camus sees three consequences of the absurd: "my revolt, my freedom and my passion." By applying unflinching logic to life, the absurd man rejects the "invitation to death," meaning suicide. Camus concludes that he has outlined a way of thinking—but that "the point is to live."

These are the three key principles of Camus' response to the absurd. Firstly, one must revolt against being defeated by the absurd, by keeping it in constant view (rather than suppressing it or committing suicide as an escape). This defiance in light of certain failure is precisely why Camus bases his thinking on the Sisyphus myth. Secondly, people must achieve freedom from the false illusions that they use to give their lives meaning—an earthly freedom. Thirdly, people must have the passion to live in such a way that gives total commitment to the present moment.

5. THE ABSURD MAN

In this section, Camus tries to move towards a more practical understanding of how to live with the absurd. The absurd man, he says, "lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime" without relying on any promises of eternity or external justifications. Camus promises to show "illustrations"—but not "models" to follow—of people who live effectively with the absurd.

As Camus has been keen to reject the overly abstract "solutions" of philosophers, here he seeks to address the practical implications of effective living with the absurd. The quibble between "illustrations" and "models" seems a little disingenuous—surely, if these are relevant examples of absurd lives, they are also options available to everyone to follow.

6. THE ABSURD MAN: DON JUANISM

Camus' first example of the absurd man is Don Juan, an infamous seducer of women. For Camus, Don Juan rejects any notion of "total love" and instead loves each woman "with the same passion and each with his whole self"—this is Don Juan's "gift" and "profound quest."

There are numerous versions of the Don Juan story in literature and art, but he is generally portrayed as a libertine free from the usual confines of society, and an unrivalled seducer. There is an obvious problem in the way that women are seen as conquests. While it of course is a deeply misogynistic idea, it also undermines the idea of the universality of the absurd. Women, here, are treated as essentially different creatures then men.

Some people think Don Juan is a melancholy character, but Camus disagrees. There are two reasons people are melancholy: "they don't know or they hope." Don Juan, claims Camus, "knows and does not hope." Instead, he lives for the moment.

Don Juan knows that life has no meaning, and doesn't hope to give it any. Importantly, Camus doesn't address the repetitiveness of Don Juan's behavior, which seems to contradict Camus' earlier criticism of "habitual" living.

Camus dismisses criticisms of Don Juan that he uses the same "speeches" on "all women." What matters for anyone seeking "quantity in his joys"—and quantity is favorable to Camus than quality—"efficacy" is the most important thing. Don Juan's actions realize an "ethic of quantity."

Quantity of women seduced is conflated with quantity of "joys." Don Juan's reliance on the "efficacy" of what are, essentially, smooth pick-up lines, again raises the question of whether Don Juan is living a life out of deeply ingrained habit or genuinely out of passion for living in the moment.

Camus admits that there is something "selfish" about Don Juan, but rejects that this is a problem. He claims that Don Juan can actually be considered less selfish than most lovers because he doesn't seek to possess or control the other person. Camus states that "there is no noble love but that which recognizes itself to be both short-lived and exceptional."

Camus sees in Don Juan the application of life's inevitable end to the way in which he engages with his lovers—his short-lived, passionate affairs mirrors the fleeting nature of a human life.

Though there are people that would like to punish Don Juan for his behavior, Camus insists that Don Juan simply lives outside of society's normal moral codes. This means that his "fate" can never be a "punishment."

Camus implies here that society's moral codes, rooted in religious restrictions, prevent people from living in the moment the way Don Juan admirably does.

7. THE ABSURD MAN: DRAMA

Camus' next example of a life lived with the absurd, rather than in effort to reject it, is the actor. The actor wants to enter into the "diversity" of different lives, and embraces the "realm" of the "ephemeral." His fame is one of the most short-lived of all artists' (Camus is thinking of stage actors here). Camus casts doubt on the idea of posterity anyway, saying that a writer of even Goethe's stature will be forgotten in "ten thousand years" (except for perhaps by archaeologists interested in the time period).

Here, Camus returns to the idea that life is meaningless because any meaning it contains is doomed to fade away in time. Paradoxically, Camus praises the actor-figure because their way of living makes a virtue out of the shortness of life. This doesn't take into account acting in films; cinema lends a kind of posterity that is in parallel with that of a writer.

The stage actor, says Camus, has only "three hours" and a relatively small amount of space to live out other lives. The actor, like a traveler, is always on the move, experiencing a "quantity" of different lives. And in his work, the actor shows to what extent "appearing creates being"; he loses himself to find himself.

An interesting counterpoint to Camus' idea of acting here would be to look at the different methods actors have at their disposal for rendering certain emotions. Some actors, for example, use a tragic personal memory to help them portray sadness in their character—this could arguably be said to represent a commitment not so much to different lives but to a greater "depth" of their own (the individual life behind the character).

Actors, says Camus, use their body like a sculptor's tool. He is speaking especially of "great drama" like Shakespeare, in which the actor is given the "*opportunity* to fulfil his wholly physical fate."

Shakespeare is an especially relevant writer because his works try to delve deep into the meaning of life.

Camus examines how the Church has, over the years, opposed the practice of acting. The Christian Church insists on the unity of the soul—one single identity—and the promise of a deferred eternal life. In contrast, Actors insists on multiple identities and living in the moment.

Religion represents hope for an afterlife, and to Camus this prevents an individual from living in the present with the absurd in full view.

8. THE ABSURD MAN: CONQUEST

In this section, Camus holds up the conqueror as an example of the absurd life. At some point in his life, says Camus, a man must choose between action and contemplation—a conqueror chooses the former.

Camus' next example of an absurd life, that of the conqueror, is again a predominantly male one.

The conqueror knows that his actions are ultimately futile but chooses to do them anyway in full knowledge of this fact. If man aims to be something, it has to be in *this* life, says the conqueror. Conflict brings out the fullest potential in people, because they live in full view of the likelihood of death.

The conqueror brings a kind of vivacity to life by engaging in actions that he knows might bring about his death. By "conqueror," Camus essentially means "warrior" or "fighter"—not expressly the individual who leads the takeover of a new territory.

The Church opposes the conqueror, just as it did the actor. Conquerors reject any notion of the eternal—to the conqueror, the only "truths" are those that can be touched by the hand.

Like the actor-figure, the conqueror rejects any deferral of life (like eternal life espoused by the Church)—the only life is the one to be lived here today.

Camus concludes this section by reminding the reader that Don Juan, the actor and the conqueror are just sketches of a "style of life" that "plays the absurd." He insists that he is not proposing "moral codes" or "judgments." They are extreme examples, he says, but theoretically anyone could live an absurd life by refusing to try and resolve absurdity—even an office worker, as long as they "live in harmony with a universe without future and without weakness."

It is problematic for Camus to claim that his examples of absurd lives do not contain any moral codes—they most certainly involve judgments. Camus fundamentally sees these lives as more quantitative, more conscious of the absurd, and, in essence, more valid than the average life. Furthermore, in making his examples of absurd lives primarily male, he does away with the experiences of half of the human population and undermines the only supposedly universal truth: the absurd. His concluding remarks seem to suggest that, if an individual is aware of the meaninglessness of their life, this is enough to live with the absurd.

9. ABSURD CREATION: PHILOSOPHY AND FICTION

Camus reserves an entire section to examine the relationship between the creative act and the absurd life. As a fiction writer himself, most of his focus lies there. Camus sees creation as the "absurd joy *par excellence*" in terms of "breathing" with the absurd and "recognizing its lessons."

As Camus has stated earlier, he does not consider himself to be a philosopher and is more concerned with the practicalities of living with the absurd. Accordingly, it makes sense in the trajectory of the book for him to incorporate something as close to his own life as literature.

Creating, says Camus, is a kind of "living doubly," in which the creator attempts to re-create their reality which, at the same time, "signifies nothing else." Such men, says Camus, examine, enlarge and enrich their "ephemeral island" even though they know they can solve nothing. The creator can only experience and describe, not explain and solve. Art is a symptom of the absurd, not a cure.

The creator is similar to the scientist mentioned earlier in the book, whose work can describe but never explain. That is, both can examine how *the world works—in smaller and smaller parts—but never answer the overarching question of* why *it exists. An artist lives doubly because he invents another world just as meaningless as the one he lives in.*

Camus wonders if it is possible to create "an absurd work of art." A good artist must operate in the constant knowledge that his work signifies nothing outside of itself; he must be as capable of repudiating art as making it. Camus cites the French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, as an example.

The artist, then, must not consider his work too precious—he must be as ready to denounce it as to make it. Arthur Rimbaud was a prodigious French poet who gave up poetry while still a young man.

Camus praises the art that works to reflect just a part of the human experience, instead of those that try to explain the entirety of experience. Camus praises music as a form, because it is "devoid of lessons" and based on "sensation." Camus suggest that fiction is the art form most tempted to "explain" reality, and intends to see if it can truly embody the absurd.

Writers feel most inclined to "explain" reality because language is the mode of explanation. Music, on the other hand, is more ephemeral, existing only in the listener's ears at the time of listening. Camus' preference for work that reflects a "part" of experience contrasts with the common project of philosophers: to construct a unifying system that makes sense of the world.

To think, says Camus, is either to create a world or limit the one being lived in. Even philosophers are creators, he says, in that they rely on characters, symbols, and "plot-endings."

Philosophy and art have much in common, but Camus believes philosophy is especially prone to trying to "explain" reality.

Camus believes that the novel has taken "the lead" over "poetry and the essay," representing a "greater intellectualization of the art." That said, he reminds the reader that he is only talking of "the greatest" novels—there is plenty of "trash" out there too. The novelist is a kind of world-builder. The best novelists, like Balzac, Sade, Melville, Dostoevsky and Kafka, are distinctly "philosophical novelists."

Camus likes these writers because they show characters in their relationship to the absurd. The word "greatest" implies a value system that judges the worth of books according to their relationship to the absurd; arguably, this violates Camus' principle that life should be lived for quantity, not quality. Once again, the writers Camus mentions are all men, with books predominantly populated by men—the reader might well wonder if a vast "part" of human existence, that of women, is missing from Camus' discussion.

These writers, says Camus, demonstrate a rejection of "any principle of explanation" and instead use "images" as their way of philosophizing. Work like theirs justifies what Camus calls "an old theme": "a little thought estranges from life whereas much thought reconciles to life."

Of course, The Myth of Sisyphus *should be considered on Camus' own terms. Though Camus is primarily a novelist, this particular book seems like a direct attempt to explain the world: the world is absurd, here's why, and here's what can be done about it.*

Camus asks whether, in accepting a life "*without appeal*," an individual can then agree to "work and create *without appeal*." It is imperative that the artist remains aware of the "gratuitousness" of their work. Camus resolves to investigate "a favourite theme" from the work of Russian novelist, Dostoevsky, which "denotes awareness of the absurd."

Camus believes that art must offer no false hope, and only serve to demonstrate the absurd in its rich variety of forms.

10. ABSURD CREATION: KIRILOV

In Dostoevsky's novels, Camus detects evidence of an absurd sensibility. The Russian author's books argue that "existence is illusory *or* it is eternal." But this inquiry is not enough for him, says Camus of Dostoevsky—if it were, he would have been a philosopher. Dostoevsky is interested in how such intellectual dilemmas actively affect people in their actual lives.

Camus firmly believes that most people's existences are illusory. The reasoning behind the absurd is to do away with illusions and live in full awareness of life's ultimate meaningless. In this section, Camus demonstrates the differing functions of novels as opposed to philosophy.

Camus examines one particular character from one of Dostoevsky's novels, *The Possessed*. This man, Kirilov, feels that in order for existence to make sense, God "is necessary." Despite this, he cannot shake the feeling that God doesn't exist, and winds up committing "logical suicide." He kills himself to "revolt" against the problem and to exert his "freedom."

In Dostoevsky's novel, Kirilov feels he will do mankind a service by killing himself and proving, firstly, that the supremacy of the human will (as opposed to God's rule), and, secondly, that death is nothing to fear. This is the "logic" behind his suicide.

Camus believes that Kirilov's suicide constitutes him taking on the role of God himself, a logic that he admits is "absurd." Essentially, if God does not exist, then individuals are the God of their own lives. Jesus, believes Kirilov, lived in and died for "a falsehood," personifying the "whole human drama." He was not the "God-man but the man-god," which is true to an extent of all people. Kirilov's suicide, says Camus, is meant to educate people, borne of a "love of his neighbor" rather than "despair." Kirilov's last words are "all is well."

Kirilov is, of course, narrowly defining religion as the Christian tradition. Jesus' death, for Kirilov, only proved one fact: the absurdity of life. In this formula, Jesus dies for others' sins not to redeem them, but more to bring awareness to the human condition. The "all is well" phrase is especially important for Camus—he feels that, if a person can say this to themselves no matter what comes, they are incorporating, rather than trying to resolve, the absurd.

Camus supposes that "probably no one so much as Dostoevsky has managed to give the absurd world such familiar and tormenting charms," and that he brought to life the "passionate world of indifference" that people recognize in their "everyday anxieties." But Camus then criticizes Dostoevsky for eventually turning back to God. Dostoevsky states elsewhere: "If faith in immortality is so necessary to the human being (that without it he comes to the point of killing himself) it must therefore be the normal state of humanity. Since this is the case, the immortality of the human soul exists with doubt."

Dostoevsky, in Camus' assessment, succeeds in rendering the absurd in his novels. That is, characters like Kirilov embody actual situations that people might find themselves in, and these situations are characterized by, and reflective of, the absurd. However, Dostoevsky as a man, rather than as a novelist, fails to keep the absurd in full view and falls back on what Camus considers to be an irrational belief in God. It's worth remembering that Camus and Dostoevsky are writing from considerably different vantage points—Dostoevsky's world was predominantly religious.

Camus concludes that Dostoevsky is more of an "existential novelist" than an absurd one. But the Russian novelist shows the absurd in function; even if he does eventually side *against* his characters, he at least "propounds the absurd problem." A true absurd work, says Camus, would not "provide a reply" to the absurd, but simply show its existence. Dostoevsky answered Kirilov's dilemma by behaving as if "existence is illusory *and* it is eternal." For Camus, only the first proposition is true.

Perhaps, then, it is unfairly critical to say that Dostoevsky's novel fails on the terms of the absurd. Camus seems to claim it to be "existential" based on the later actions of its author—but as a stand-alone work, The Possessed *does show a "part" of the human experience in grappling with the absurd.*

11. ABSURD CREATION: EPHEMERAL CREATION

Camus notes how hope "cannot be eluded for ever" and was capable of besetting even someone as skilled at rendering the absurd as Dostoevsky. But, says Camus, "one recognizes one's course by discovering the paths that stray from it." That is, even works that fail to be absurd can still be illustrative. Camus cites *Moby Dick* as a genuinely absurd work.

Camus flips his earlier statement on its head: whereas most people turn to hope in order to "elude" the absurd, Camus sees hope itself as the thing that needs to be "eluded." Unfortunately, Camus does not go into any further detail about why Melville's 'Moby Dick' *is a successfully absurd novel.*

The absurd artist must remain vigilant about the ultimate meaninglessness of their work, and "must give the void its colours." Creation, says Camus, is the "most effective" way of maintaining awareness of the absurd.

Creation actively serves the creator by helping them to keep the absurd in full view. This is a reversal of the way art is usually thought about as being created for an audience—here, it is as much for the artist themselves.

Camus stresses that, in his ideas about creativity and the absurd, he is not calling for the "illustration of a thesis." He doesn't want to read "the thesis-novel," in which a novelist sets out to *prove* some truth they "feel sure of possessing." Instead, artists should make work that "abandons unity" and "glorifies diversity."

Camus wants art to be concerned with describing experience in all its forms without feeling the need to dictate a central message. This heightens the sense of absence created by the lack of discussion in this book about any of woman's experience, as opposed to man.

Camus reminds the reader that "none of all this has any real meaning." Knowing this should give the artist "more freedom in the realization" of their work, says Camus. Man should not be "bound" by the "illusion of another world," but should fill his life with the "difficult wisdom" of the absurd and the "ephemeral passion" of responding to it.

Like the absurd individual more generally, the artist is afforded freedom by their close relationship with the absurd. It helps them to resist illusions and embrace the ephemeral nature of life—and to reflect that ephemerality in their work.

12. THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

In this section, Camus recounts the myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is a mortal condemned by the gods to roll a **rock** to the top of a mountain, only for it to then fall back to the bottom. His fate is to keep returning to the rock in order to push it back up again.

Though the myth of Sisyphus frames the book by providing the title, it's only in this last section that Camus fully engages with the story. Sisyphus' fate is inherently absurd, an eternity of toil that never amounts to anything. The mountainous setting heightens the sense of unending, unimaginable timescales.

There are different accounts of Sisyphus' story, as well as his reason for being punished. Whether it's that he "stole their secrets," or double-crossed them in order to receive a new fountain for the city of which he was the ruler, Sisyphus didn't respect the gods in the way they wanted. Another story is that Sisyphus had put Death in chains, incurring the wrath of Pluto.

The story of Sisyphus putting Death in chains is an especially interesting one, because it is fundamentally antagonistic to Camus' concept of the absurd. The absurd is based on life's meaninglessness, which in turn is based on the inevitability of death—but for a short while, Sisyphus interrupts the work of Death. In this brief period of time, it's unclear if life is still absurd or, given the promise of eternity, takes on a new meaning. Sisyphus, in this story, wants to cheat mortality—not embrace it.

Just before he died, Sisyphus wanted to test his wife's love by ordering that she "cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square," which she promptly did. Because he hadn't been buried properly, Sisyphus received permission from Pluto to return to Earth in order to chastise her.

Again, Sisyphus' actions don't seem to embrace the inevitability of death—instead, he seems to do whatever he can to live again. The woman in this story is a marginalized figure, reflecting the role of women in Camus' book throughout.

Once back on earth, Sisyphus fell in love again with the "water and sun, warm stones and the sea." He refused to return to the underworld. Eventually, Mercury came and snatched him back. This time, **Sisyphus' rock** was waiting for him.

Sisyphus has a genuine lust for life that seems to be particularly strong when it comes to his admiration for the natural world.

For Camus, Sisyphus is the "absurd hero," both through his "passions" and his "torture." He exerted his entire being "towards accomplishing nothing." Camus pictures Sisyphus pushing his **rock** up the mountain, "the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass," before the rock rolls down once more.

Here, the materiality of the natural world heightens the futility of Sisyphus' task. The rock and the mountain, operating on different time scales to man's usual life (that is, they are long-standing fixtures that endure forever, while humans live short, temporary lives), come to represent Sisyphus' eternal fate. It seems strange that Camus claims Sisyphus as the "absurd hero," given that Sisyphus would undoubtedly prefer to be living his earthly life once more—he doesn't embrace his fate, but simply has no choice in the matter.

Camus is particularly interested in the "pause" when Sisyphus has to go back down to the bottom of the mountain to start again. It seems to Camus like "breathing-space which returns as surely as [Sisyphus'] suffering" and represents "the hour of consciousness." In these moments, says Camus, Sisyphus is "stronger than his **rock**" and "superior to his fate."

The pause gives Sisyphus a moment of reflection. But there's nothing in the myth that confirms Sisyphus is "stronger than his rock"; instead, Camus is imbuing Sisyphus with the qualities he thinks are necessary to live the absurd life.

Camus likens Sisyphus' fate to "the workman of today" repeating the "same tasks" every time he goes to work. It is Camus' full awareness of his fate that is both his torture and his "victory." "Crushing truths," says Camus, "perish from being acknowledged." Camus thinks Oedipus, a Greek king who was destined to marry his mother and murder his father, bore a similar fate.

The redemption for Sisyphus, then, is a paradox: he is saved by his hopelessness. The "workman of today" is condemned by the fact that he continues to hope, despite the mundane repetition of his everyday life. Again, Camus glosses over the type of labor typically performed by women—especially childcare and domestic work. Camus slightly contradicts himself, as earlier in the essay he has been very keen to avoid any sense that "crushing truths" can "perish."

Happiness and the absurd are "inseparable," states Camus. Like Kirilov, Oedipus concludes that "all is well," a remark that Camus says "echoes in the wild and limited universe of man." Camus sees Sisyphus as owning his fate in the same way that the "absurd man" does. Both are the "master" of their days, even if there is no meaning to them.

The notion of happiness is introduced very late into the overall discussion—Camus has not expressly aimed, thus far, to show how man could or should be happy. That said, he has consistently emphasized the importance of accepting and acknowledging the meaninglessness of life. The reader might well question whether Sisyphus is the master of his days—his fate is undeniably the one chosen for him by the gods. He would clearly rather be back home, sitting in the sun by the sea.

Camus says, "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain!" Like Oedipus and Kirilov, Sisyphus "concludes that all is well." Sisyphus knows "each atom of that **stone**, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain." It is necessary, concludes Camus, to "imagine Sisyphus happy."

Camus suggests there is a kind of intimacy between Sisyphus and his stone, and that increasing his knowledge of "each atom" constitutes a kind of acceptance of his fate on Sisyphus' part. But the final line here is intriguing because of the word "imagine." The reader might consider that "imagining" constitutes a form of "illusion"—if Sisyphus isn't happy, perhaps imagining *that he is represents the kind of false hope that Camus has previously rallied against.*

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