

Chapter 1

Le Mythe de Sisyphe by Albert Camus—trans. by Hélène Brown



Albert Camus, Library of Congress

About the author...

In 1957 the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Albert Camus whose “clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience...” Camus’s background as an Algerian journalist, as an essayist and playwright, as well as his role in the French resistance during World War II, form the well-spring of his belief in the possibility of the moral life and the consequent triumph of human value in response to the experience of “the absurd.” Camus’ work exemplifies our capacity to impose mean-

ing *vis-à-vis* the desolation of human existence. Although he is thought of as an existentialist, Camus rejected that label because of his devotion to personal moral value. For Camus, morality is not a matter of expediency.

About the work...

Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*¹ affirms that only by facing the absurd can I act authentically; otherwise, I adopt a convenient attitude of wishful thinking. Although I cannot count on the consequences of my actions, my life's meaning comes from seizing awareness of what I do. I must act in the face of meaninglessness—I must revolt against the absurd—if I am not to despair from the ultimate hopelessness and limitations of my life.

From the reading...

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain from which the huge stone would roll down by its own weight. They had thought with some reason that no punishment is more dreadful than labor for which there is no use nor hope.”

Ideas of Interest from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

1. Explain in what way Camus believes that Sisyphus is representative of our own lives.
2. What does Camus mean by the observation that “Sisyphus is the absurd hero”?
3. Explain how “A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself.”

1. Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* in *Essais*. Paris, Gallimard et Calmann-Lévy. Part IV, 1965.

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4. Explain what Camus means when he writes, “There is no destiny that cannot be surmounted by scorn.” In what way does scorn make Sisyphus superior to his fate?
5. Explain how (and why) “when the call of happiness becomes too oppressive,” the rock becomes victorious. What does this insight mean for everyday life?
6. What is the relation between happiness and the absurd? What does Camus mean by absurdity?
7. What does Camus mean by there being no higher destiny than “a personal fate”? How is this notion related to the possibility of happiness for human beings?



The Cascades, Constantine, Algeria, Library of Congress

The Reading Selection from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain from which the huge stone would roll down by its own weight.

They had thought with some reason that no punishment is more dreadful than labor for which there is no use nor hope.

If we believe Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. However, according to another tradition, he tended to commit highway robbery. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions vary as to the reasons why he was given to be the worthless laborer of the underworld. First of all, he is accused of taking the gods a bit lightly. He betrayed their secrets. Ægina—the daughter of Æsopus— was abducted by Jupiter. Her father found her disappearance disturbing and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to inform Æsopus on the condition that he Æsopus, give water to the citadel of Corinth. Rather than the wrath of the gods, Sisyphus 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 desert and silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror.

From the reading...

“It has already been understood that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much because of his passions as because of his torment. It has already been understood that Sisyphus is the absurd hero.”

Also, it is said that Sisyphus, being near death, unwarily tried to test his wife’s love. He ordered her not to bury his body and to dispose of it publicly on the forum. Sisyphus next found himself in the underworld. There, angered by an example of obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return on earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed the water and the sun, the warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to return to the darkness of the underworld. Promptings, anger, and warnings of the gods were all in vain. For many years thereafter, he lived facing the curved shoreline, the dazzling blue sea, and enjoying the smiles of the earth. The gods found necessary to summon him. Mercury arrived and grabbed the impudent Sisyphus by the collar, and, snatching him away from his joys, forced him back to the underworld where his rock was ready for him.



The River, El Cantara, Algeria, Library of Congress

It has already been understood that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much because of his passions as because of his torment. His disdain for the gods, his hatred of death and his passion for life won him that unspeakable torture of exerting his whole being to achieving nothing. It is the price that one must pay for the passions of this earth. We are told nothing about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are created for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body that is straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up the slope hundred of times over; one sees the face twisted by the effort, the cheek pressing against the rock, the shoulder being used to brace against a mass covered with clay, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the truly human safeguard of two hands clotted with earth. When this long effort, measuring up to boundless space and no sky and fathomless time, comes through to the very end of its course, the purpose of it is achieved. Sisyphus then watches the rock as it hurtles down with a few bounds toward that lower world from whence he will have to push it up back to the summit. Again, he goes down to the bottom of the slope.

It is during his return, his pause there, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I imagine that man going down with a heavy yet even step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That moment, like breathing, which returns as regularly and certainly as his torment, that is the moment of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the summit and enters a little deeper into

the lair of the gods, Sisyphus is superior to his destiny. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, it is because the hero is conscious. What would his torment be if at each step the hope of succeeding sustained him? In today's world, a worker works everyday of his life at the same tasks, making his destiny no less absurd. But the tone is tragic during the rare moments only when Sisyphus becomes conscious. Proletarian of the gods, powerless and bearing inner revolt, Sisyphus knows the extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of while he goes down the slope. The lucidity that was supposed to be his torment by the same token is the achievement of his victory. There is no destiny that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

From the reading...

"It is during his return, his pause there, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!"

If on his way down, Sisyphus sometimes may have sorrow, he may also have joy. This word is not too emphatic. Again I imagine Sisyphus returning toward his rock. His sorrow was at the beginning. When the images of the earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too oppressive, it happens that sadness rises in a man's heart: this is the victory of the rock; this is the rock itself. This vast distress is too heavy to bear. There come our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being recognized. Thus, Œdipus at first obeys his fate without knowing it. From the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the very same moment, blind and in despair, he realizes that the only bond that ties him to the world is a feminine young hand of which he feels the freshness. His words ring out immoderately: "Despite so many ordeals, my wiser age and the nobility of my soul make me judge that all is well." Sophocles's Œdipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the formula for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom pairs with modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! By such ways. . . ?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. The error would be to say that happiness is necessarily born of the absurd; it happens as well that the feeling of absurdity is born of happi-

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ness. “I judge that all is well” says Œdipus, and this remark is sacred. It rings out in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches us that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had entered it with dissatisfaction and a liking for futile sufferings. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.



From the Admiralty, Algiers, Algeria, Library of Congress

All Sisyphus’s silent joy is here: his fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, when he contemplates his torment, the absurd man makes all idols be silent. In the universe suddenly given back to its silence, thousands of marveling little voices of the world arise. Unconscious secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and the price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and one has to know darkness. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth have no ending. If there is a fated life destiny that is personal to each man, there is no, or there is rather one only, superhuman destiny for all men, which the absurd man judges fatal and despicable. For the rest, he knows that he alone is master of his life. There is a subtle moment when man looks back in a glimpse over his life. Sisyphus, on the way to meeting his rock, contemplates that series of actions like dots on the curve of his destiny: his own for being created by him, perfected under the watchful eye of his memory, and which will soon to be sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the very human origin of everything that is human, a blind man having the desire to see and knowing that the night has no end, Sisyphus is not out of step [with our time]. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One will always find one's own burden again. But Sisyphus teaches that higher sense of faithfulness that negates the gods and is capable of lifting rocks. He too judges that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master, appears to him neither sterile nor futile. Each particle of that stone, each mineral flake of that mountain filled with darkness, in its singularity constitutes a world. The struggle itself toward summits is enough by itself to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

From the reading...

"The rock is still rolling."

Related Ideas

Motion Picture and Video: *The Plague*, directed by Luis Puenzo, 1993. Cast: William Hurt, Robert Duvall, and Raul Julia. The film is based on Albert Camus's *La Peste*. Rated R; 1 hour, 45 minutes (video 1 hour, 5 minutes).

Literary Outlaw (<http://inch.com/~ari/ac1.html>) (*Photographs of Albert Camus*). Copyrighted (and rarely seen) photographs scanned by Ari Frankel from photographs in the Herbert R. Lottman biography of Camus.

BBCi—Books by Author (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/books/author/camus/>) *Albert Camus*. Three page biography of Camus.

Nobel eMuseum (<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech.html>) *Albert Camus—Banquet Speech*. Albert Camus's speech at the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, December 10, 1957.

Solitaire et Solidaire (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0397camu.htm>) *Spike Magazine*—interview by Russell Wilkinson with Catherine Camus about her father's book *The First Man*, a work first published in 1995, composed of the unedited and unfinished manuscript found in the car crash in which Camus was tragically killed in 1960. If you like, you can

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practice your French translation skills for this interview at this location:
Solitaire et Solidaire. (<http://www.spikemagazine.com/0899camu.htm>)

Difficult Choices for France’s Most Reluctant Existentialist
(http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1571/n8_v14/20351800/p1/article.jhtml)

Roger Kaplan’s article on Camus’s enduring appeal from *Insight Magazine*—a brief overview of Camus’s outlook for beginners.

Albert Camus—Links (www.littlebluelight.com/lblphp/links.php?ikey=3).
Little Blue Light. Excellent list of Camus links for works, quotes, articles, and book reviews.

From the reading...

“One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness.”



Camus’s Grave Site and Home, H el ene Brown

Topics Worth Investigating

1. Camus states, “A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!” If life is tragic when we become conscious of the work and roles we play, and we become as an object when we are not conscious of the work and roles we play, how then does it become possible to think that our lives can have meaning?
2. From a psychological point of view, do some persons lose themselves in any and all activities in order to avoid consciousness of their predicament? What kind of courage would it take to become aware of their situation? Finally, what could be done about it?
3. According to Camus, how can we establish a meaning for our lives? How is it that Sisyphus can be happy? How can it be that “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth”?
4. What is the significance of the concept of fate in Camus’s explanation of the myth? Would the reality of a person’s fate preclude the possibility of that person having free will?