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Re: Submission to The Decadent Review

Dear Editor,

Please find enclosed for your consideration my 3363-word essay “The Logical Absurdity of Camus.”

Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Aida

The Logical Absurdity of Camus

There is a different kind of reality that sets in, when one is faced with the death of a parent, a reality where emptiness is strange, loss is unbelievable, and life is suddenly made of dust. “Maman died today” is the sorrow packed phrase with which Camus begins his existential work *The Stranger*. The deep philosophical truth of this confession lays in the simple and total absence that is created not only by death, but especially by the lack of intimacy that follows because of death. Yet, as the next sentences continue to build the opening of the story, the mortal destruction becomes the focus, rather than the humanity of this person, who has lost “maman”. This devastation is evident in the way that news is given to Meursault, as there is no information about when the death happened.

In a very realistic way Camus points out how death is treated by the sender of the telegram and how it is received by Meursault. Camus reveals a contrast between society and the individual, a contrast which becomes the reason of meaninglessness, for while the sender of the telegram may have not assumed the importance of time in death, for Meursault time is significant. Time determines one’s existence and time is where one lives life. The very realization of insignificance that occurs as result of timelessness of death is what highlights the magnitude of meaning within the constraints of time when he states “That doesn’t mean anything”, Meursault wants to know, and he is looking for meaning beyond life and death, beyond good and evil, and beyond the binary of heaven and hell. Finding value in time is a quest which begins with this existential statement, and ends only when Meursault is certain of his own demise.

I hadn’t done this thing but I had done another. And so? It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated. Nothing, nothing mattered, and I knew why.

Meursault is aware of his actions and knows what he deserves. This becomes clear when he realizes his own failure, which is not his tearless exhibition of his compassion for maman, but rather the crime he commits. In addition, he recognizes how and where society failed him, his friends, and even his girlfriend. All were blind to his pain, ignored his loss, and neglected his humanity. This comprehension and cognizance change his attitude toward life and death, and guide him to his peaceful place, to the mindfulness that one’s control over life is possible only within the constraints of time. *The Stranger* explores the disconnect between the society and someone’s loss; a disconnect which is based on the lack of compassion for one’s deepest loss. This divide highlights the meaning of destruction of death, which doesn’t bring only void in one’s life through loss, but it distracts from life’s intimacy, and focuses on society’s own fear of mortality, eventually forgetting about one’s “maman”, and only caring about death.

Meursault’s evolution is natural and unnoticeable. He transitions from his day to day life, to his desires, to his crime, and ultimately to his death. This is akin to Flaubert’s Emma in *Madame Bovary*, who changed from a simple peasant girl, to a wife, to a woman with her affairs, to someone who wasted her husband’s wealth, to a desperate woman who committed suicide. Guy De Maupassant’s George Duroy in *Bel Ami* is another character in French literature, who changes slowly from a simple journalist, to someone who manipulates women, and misuses their feelings, their trust, for his own gains. Camus, in tune with the French tradition of exposing human nature, transforms Meursault in a similar way, from someone who’s had relatively a “normal” and uneventful life, to someone who falls in the wrong company, participates in a crime, then commits one. These traces of progress are important in understanding the final point; the delivery of Meursault’s redemption - Meursault’s acceptance of fate. Redemption doesn’t always bring a good ending, but it does bring freedom. In making peace with his life, with his loss and finally with his death, Meursault is a hero, who despite his wrongdoings, finds what all humanity is looking for. He discovers meaning in loss, and admits that although there may not be meaning in death, there’s liberation in the thin line of time that makes humanity visible in the dark (or bright) background of eternity.

*The Stranger* seems to hint that Meursault is a hero without repentance, and thus without salvation. However, this is a misunderstood point, for Meursault is anything but unrepentant. His last encounter with the priest is the very moment that defines his face off with his own life.

I grabbed him by the collar of his cassock. I was pouring out on him everything that was in my heart, cries of anger and cries of joy He seemed so certain about everything, didn’t he? And yet none of his certainties was worth one hair of a woman’s head. He wasn’t even sure he was alive, because he was living like a dead man. Whereas it looked as if I was the one who’d come up emptyhanded. But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had. (Camus 120)

This moment is similar to that of the thief by Jesus’ side, who like Meursault was waiting for death as he hung on the cross. While Meursault’s cross is invisible, it is a cross just the same, where one’s peace is hanging. It is important to note that Jesus didn’t try to convince any of the thieves for their “sins”, and this element contrasts with the attempts of the priest who tried to show Meursault the road to “salvation”. It is this attitude of Christ that makes the thief react and claim his own peace, his own ending, and like Meursault, he too, admits his wrongdoings and waits for death. In Luke 23:41 the thief claims “And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And like this thief who made his peace with his deeds, Meursault made peace with his, firstly with his mother’s death, secondly with the value of his crime, and finally by accepting his fate. This evolution of awareness, realization, and acceptance is what brings to focus the idea of time and deeds, which stand at the center of living life not for what it may be when one dies, but for what it is while one is still alive. The thief is not concerned with after life, he’s not concerned with paradise, or eternity, he’s rather concerned with what he has, which is a deserved ending of life. This examination of one’s life is what Camus also accomplishes in Meursault, be it through the many attentive details which make Meursault’s story, or be it through the exploding reaction to the priest, which is Meursault’s point of happiness, or more than that, the point of completion.

Camus takes the same approach in which he mocks the idea of death in his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, where he articulates the life of Sisyphus by showing how the absurdity of gods is what brings about Sisyphus’ contentment with death. In this unusual analysis of happiness, Camus unmasks the very fascination humans have with eternity, and the peace one can find there, while at the same time ridiculing gods (and even society) for what they perceive as punishment by emphasizing the absurd idea when he writes: “They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” Camus contrasts in his analysis the meaning of “futile and hopeless labor” in death, and shows that, punishment in death is not what really matters, but rather the fact that gods were unable to do anything during Sisyphus’ life to bring order to his chaos, reverse his corrupt endeavors, or even help him change his ways. As Camus explores, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.

What seems a fascination to an awful character, is in fact an attraction to understanding the double standard of gods and society. While gods allowed themselves the luxury of living how they wanted, and while the society accepted the status quo of gods, Camus rebels and shows that the same that applies to gods, applies to Sisyphus. He is as immoral as the gods, and he is as responsible as the next human. Camus also notes Sisyphus’ aptitude, a skill which brought water to the citadel of Corinth. He uses the incident as an underlying comparison to Prometheus, the god who was also punished in a similar way like Sisyphus. Everyday his liver was eaten by an eagle, and every day his liver grew back, because he rebelled and brought fire to humans. This comparison of Sisyphus to Prometheus, both in their acts and in their ending, is done through the very elements which are at the basis of life, fire and water. While there isn’t a direct parallelism of the two heroes, there is a direct analogy of the elements of life, fire as the symbol of passion, and water as the symbol of fulfillment. Whether it is Sisyphus or Prometheus, in the end, their peace is achieved not in their punishment, but rather in the acceptance of that punishment. They are both heroes who defied eternity for the sake of what is worth living within the constraints of time. As Barton Palmer notes in regards to Sisyphus, “he’s rewarded by a sense of freedom, by the impulse to revolt, by the life force of passion.” Thus, by living in the absurd, one lives in truth.

But, Meursault and Sisyphus are not the only characters that have earned Camus defense and conclusion of happiness. In a fantastical fashion, Camus validates another character’s desperation: Caligula’s. He wants the moon. He wants what he can’t have. The theme of following one’s heart is obvious, and it is also obvious, that following one’s heart isn’t always what will bring happiness. Unlike Meursault and Sisyphus who realized the meaninglessness of afterlife during their lifetime, Caligula is driven by the idea that meaning is in the eternal, something which takes a special focus in a poetry reading in the fourth act.

A group of poets will be given a set theme and asked to improvise. He wants the poets among you to take part in the competition.

SCIPIO (standing very near Caligula, he recites listlessly, without looking at him)

Pursuit of happiness that purifies the heart, Skies rippling with light,

O wild, sweet, festal joys, frenzy without hope!

In this moment Caligula is completely obsessed, yet his logic is sound. He is able to give a comprehensive analysis of Scipio’s poem as he asks other poets not to compete. Caligula is observant (something which is also noted in Meursault and Sisyphus) and decides that Scipio is “very young to understand so well the lessons we can learn from death.” Yet, in all this clarity he’s overwhelmed by the idea of eternity.

By the way, an idea has just ambushed me, and I want to share it with you. Up to now my reign has been too happy. There's been no world-wide plague, no religious persecution, not even a revolution -- in short, nothing likely to give us a place in history. In a sense, you see, that’s why I have been trying to make up for the modesty of fate. I mean -- I don't know if you've followed me -- well (he gives a little laugh), in short, I’m your plague. (In a different tone) But don’t say a word. Here’s Cherea's coming. You’re on, Caesonia.

As the play ends, and Caligula continues to be “the ambushed” by his idea of “doing evil for the sake of establishing a place in history,” the play reaches a climax in which Caligula confesses that he kills so that he doesn’t feel alone. The philosophical conclusion in this confession is as chilling as it is truthful.

The living aren’t enough to populate the universe and to keep us company. When you are all here around me, you make me aware of a limitless void where I dare not look. I'm only comfortable amongst my dead. (He shivers and turns toward the audience, leaning a little forward. He has forgotten Caesonia's presence.) They are real. They are like me. They are awaiting me and urging me to hurry. I have long dialogues with this or that man who screamed to me for mercy and whose tongue I had cut out.

Caligula realizes he’s dead, despite being alive. He’s been living all this time with a purpose which has emptied him and destroyed him. He’s lived by killing and causing destruction, and he observes that this way of life has made him feel like “a creator”, something which marks his resentment and regret, for this is the “wrong freedom.” This is a moment in which the logic of absurdity through the contrast of the figure of the eternal creator and the time constraint human is fully complete.

The conclusion in Caligula is a charge against conventional wisdom determining that it is not immortality that brings happiness. Caligula’s many crimes and perverse behavior, were at the center of the absurdity as he searched for the moon, an absurdity that is not in what Caligula wants, but in the fact that this is the norm and the tendency of every human, emperors or simple people alike.

The world as it is, is unbearable. That's why I need the moon, or happiness, or immortality, or something that may sound insane, but would help correct this world.

As Simon Lea describes in his essay “Caligula, Theatre of the Absurd”, Caligula “is not just a murderous tyrant,” or “an insane dictator”. Lea portrays Caligula’s outrageous crimes in a detailed and chilling account.

He murders fathers and deliberately starts a famine. Everyone around him is humiliated and abused, but why? What is he hoping to achieve? The answer is nothing less than the transfiguration of the world.

In Caligula Camus has created a combination of Meursault and Sisyphus, and has completed a character who exposes humanity’s flaws when it dedicates itself to the unattainable, to “immortality”, or “to the moon”. Caligula, as Harrow writes, is “lucid and free; and the only explanation Camus offers for Caligula’s failure to achieve the sublimity of those like Meursault is that his is the wrong freedom at the expense of others.” Camus finalizes through this work an exploration of the three different venues of human failure, which in Meursault was exhibited through his nonchalant attitude, in Sisyphus it was revealed through the passionate defiance toward Gods, and finally in Caligula this failure triumphs when he submits to the search for immortality. Camus determines that there’s a way to find meaning in living, beyond the constraints of the life and death binary, through these absurd approaches, for they all expose the limits that life has within time, just as death is limited by the non-existence of life. There is no life without living, and there is no death without life. Eternity is a concept which shouldn’t affect the way one lives. This limitation is not a way for desperation, but rather a means for fulfillment, something which all heroes are able to attain.

What is evident is that all Camus’ heroes go through a tormenting period as they journey toward their destination. They’re all challenged by that moment in which they have to face their fate, and because of this challenge, Camus treats them with the utmost humanity, despite their flaws. He brings them under the same light in which Christ stood at the Garden of Gethsemane right before his death, where he was praying and sweating blood, asking God to spare him from his fate. However, Christ found his peace as his disciple betrayed him with a kiss, which highlights the lack of intimacy through an intimate act. This moment was followed by a trial in which Christ wasn’t judged for what he did, all the good deeds, the healing, the hope and the goodness he brought, but rather for what he didn’t do: obey the High Priest. Christ met with his ending by defying common sense. He didn’t hide, but rather waited for his accusers. He rebelled by admitting he was the Son of God, prompting the High Priest to tear up his robe, and he carried his cross in full understanding of his own path. It is in this kind of defying and rebellious attitude that Meursault accepted the certainty of death, Sisyphus surrendered to the constant pushing a boulder up the hill, and Caligula conceded to the wrong freedom.

It can be noted that none these characters have an ideal ending, in which “good wins over evil.” Yet, they all find purpose as Camus gives a solution to their conflict despite moral values. In a way, he maintains a Christ like attitude toward these unlikely heroes for the sake of their freedom, and to defy society’s standards on life and death. Camus makes it clear that death is a distraction in living life fully. For this reason, he creates situations where “the one without a sin” keeps from throwing any stones. While this happens, the reader is faced with the philosophical perspective of absurdity. This is the ultimate value where it is not the morality of one’s goodness that is appreciated, but rather the deeper and more meaningful struggle for existence that finds a solution that is both philosophical and religious, a solution in which value of life is in living fully and in harmony with the world.

Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am,” becomes almost crucial in understanding the resolution of these stories, too. The realization of thinking what one is, what life is, and not what death is, gives all these villains peace. Camus doesn’t fail in analyzing his characters’ deeds. He’s transparent with their life and purposeful in how each story evolves. He recognizes not only their failures, but also where they come from. Attitude toward death is the biggest error of humanity. The fear of non-existence is what drives a failed existence. Camus is bold in his resolutions of his characters. He may be misunderstood and even accused that by giving a happy ending to villains he’s justifying evil in the world. Yet he demasks this fascination with death and afterlife, and proves that it distracts from the value that can be found in life.

This unconventional reasoning concludes the absurdity of existence, or rather the explanation of non-existence. By focusing on life after death, Camus derides conformism and rebels against it by showing how happiness, or immortality must not be used to forget the very meaning of life while living, which is responsibility toward other humans, toward nature, toward this world, where everyone may be a passerby with a purpose of giving meaning to meaninglessness. Camus builds the absurd relation between society and death, and introduces the most unlikely heroes, concluding that in the end, it doesn't really matter if one is happy in their death, for what's left behind is the chaos and the suffering of those who live with the deeds, with the effects of a crime, with the results of someone else's bad choices. Life is not about how happy one is in death, but what one does while living. This is Camus’ core philosophy. By showing the irrelevance of death, he emphasizes the power of one's actions; he doesn’t give "happiness to villains", but confirms that happiness is what matters in life.

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