
The Myth of Sisyphus by Albert Camus: an Allegory for the Human Condition

There are many reasons why the tale of “The Myth of Sisyphus” is important to Albert Camus, for one, it is an allegory for what it means to be human. Camus expertly dissects Sisyphus’ existence and relates it to three final consequences of human life with the absurd; freedom, revolt and passion. Sisyphus’ story is the epitome of the human condition, and that human beings cannot escape the condemnation of futile labor. Sisyphus is crowned as the absurd hero of the story by Camus, a title not to be taken lightly. Sisyphus lived his whole life revolting against death and was fiercely passionate about living, he always chose to fight for life. This passion, revolt and freedom is precisely why he was punished for his passions.

The absurd is a theme that much of Albert Camus’ work revolves around. The absurd is described as the gap between oneself and one’s senses, who one thinks they are and the resistance of the world to human endeavors. Camus wrote that “the world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is”. Here Camus is talking about the primitive hostility of the world, how dense and strange it is. The absurd is the realization that the world exists independently from any meaning that one attempts to give it. Camus wrote about routine and waking up, “Rising, street-car, four hours in the office or factory, meal, street-car, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday... According to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed... but one day the ‘why’ arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement”. Here Camus explains that one can only become conscious by asking themselves ‘why’ they are doing what they are doing, usually this happens when one is unhappy, Camus expresses often in “The Myth of Sisyphus” that the human experience is not an easy one. Camus further explains that habits cover up the obscure character of the world, where the world might seem as though it serves one’s purpose, the world really has nothing to do with one’s purposes, desires or interests. “For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers.”, essentially, the world resists any attempts of appropriation. The absurd also involves the knowledge and understanding one has. In the grand scheme of things, we cannot comprehend ourselves and our actions do not mean anything. Camus says that ultimately, we know very little and what we do know falls short of what we really want, “Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine”.

In order to understand the relationship of the concept of the absurd and of Sisyphus’ existence one must know a brief synopsis of Sisyphus’ story. The myth of Sisyphus is the story of how Sisyphus became the “futile laborer of the underworld” tasked with rolling a rock to the top of a

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mountain, just to watch it roll back down and repeat the task for all of eternity. Sisyphus had a long list of misdeeds he committed against the gods, from “stealing their secrets”, to “putting death in chains”, and finally tricking Pluto into allowing him to return to earth whence he promptly ran off to live by the sea and enjoy the “smiles of the earth”. These actions made Sisyphus the absurd hero. Camus wrote that “Sisyphus is the absurd hero, 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...”. Sisyphus’ punishment, Camus writes, is the “price that must be paid for the passions of this earth”. This is why Camus is so drawn to the story, the pure absurdness of Sisyphus’ life and the relation to absurd freedom. This leads into the most important moment of the story to Camus, when Sisyphus’ becomes conscious of his punishment.

The moment in Sisyphus’ story that was most important to Albert Camus is when Sisyphus gains consciousness of his futile labor. There is one specific moment, “During that return, that pause...At each of those moments when Sisyphus leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock”. Sisyphus becomes stronger than his rock because he is conscious and content with his sentence, Camus even wrote “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”. Consciousness is key, this is what makes Sisyphus an absurd hero, he is completely aware of his fate in a constant cycle of futile labor.

This moment of realization for Sisyphus relates perfectly to the three consequences of the absurd that Camus outlines at the end of his essay. The three consequences were passion, revolt and freedom. Camus main thesis is that life has no meaning and that is what makes it worth living, this is the perfect introduction to passion. Passion is the commitment to life even though it is meaningless, Sisyphus does this by committing to his destiny, “he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates the serious of unrelated actions which becomes his fate”.

Revolt is the refusal of a certain fate, not the acceptance. A great illustration is when Sisyphus revolts against the gods, he refused even if could not win, he lived without appeal to transcendent order. Another form of revolt is saying no to death by living. Camus lists suicide as one way to evade the absurd, but the only way to revolt against it is to live and search for some kind of meaning in life even though real knowledge cannot be achieved. “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”. It is clear that Camus believes one should always keep the absurd at the front of one’s mind never suppressing it or attempting to escaping it which is exactly what Sisyphus does by accepting his fate.

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Finally, there is freedom. Camus is interested in freedom from the order of transcendent value and freedom from the temporality that is defined by the future. Sisyphus is free from transcendent power because he “negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well”. Sisyphus owned his fate “created by him... soon to be sealed by death”. “The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible, but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation”. Here Camus explains that no matter the life, choices or consequences, we all have the same fate, and because of this lack of hope for the future one can have a sense of “inner freedom”.

It is clear that “The Myth of Sisyphus” is an allegory for the human condition. Through the triumphant story of Sisyphus who owns his fate and his rock one can see that Camus was marked by the actions Sisyphus took against the absurd to be passionate, revolt and be liberated by the creation of his own freedom.

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