A Study of Albert Camus’ Absurdist Creed with Reference To His ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’

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Abstract

This article intends to delve into Camus’ idea of absurdity as it emerges from his The Myth of Sisyphus.[1] Although the notion of the ‘absurd’ is pervasive in all of the literature of Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus is his chief work on the subject. In it, Camus considers absurdity as a confrontation, an opposition, a conflict or a "divorce" between two ideals. Specifically, he defines the human condition as absurd, as the confrontation between man's desire for significance, meaning and clarity on the one hand – and the silent, cold universe on the other. He continues that there are specific human experiences evoking notions of absurdity. Such a realization or encounter with the absurd leaves the individual with a choice: suicide, a leap of faith or recognition. He concludes that recognition is the only defensible option. For Camus, suicide is a "confession" that life is not worth living; it is a choice implicitly declaring that life is "too much". Suicide offers the most basic "way out" of absurdity: the immediate termination of the self and its place in the universe.

Keywords: Camus; absurd; suicide; death; Sisyphus

Introduction

The absurd man is the one who comes to terms with the absurdist reasoning; that is, with his “appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle” (The Myth of Sisyphus, 51). Thus, the absurd man cannot turn back on his longing for familiarity and cohesion nor can he get away from the irrationality and chaos of the world. On the contrary, he wants to preserve what crushes him. He understands that it is the consciousness that splits the mind and the world, still he keeps it alive as his most inmate truth. “If, therefore, I want to preserve it, I can, through a constant awareness, (The Myth of Sisyphus 52).

The absurd man does not reconcile. He enters the desert with his revolt and lucidity. His present exile becomes his kingdom in which he finds “the wine of the absurd and the bread of indifference on which he feeds his greatness.” (The Myth of Sisyphus 52). Thus, the absurd man returns to the chain of daily gestures but this time he is armed with a new weapon of freedom. Having liberated himself from his plans for the future as well as from his attachment of principles, as Maquet points out, “the absurd man sees opening to him total liberty, which the prospect of death increases and exalts still more”².

The Models of the Absurd:

Camus provides three models: Don Juan, the actor and the conqueror. These few heroes, armed with nothing but lucidity and freedom, use past experience as basis for their action and carry on the absurd reasoning by giving it a specific attitude. Don Juan, an ordinary seducer, is conscious of the futility of his activity. This is what makes him absurd. The more he loves the stronger the absurd grows. He goes from woman
to woman to repeat the same exhaustive experience: 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 least? No, he says once more’ (The Myth of Sisyphus 67).

The fate of the actor, says Camus, is essentially absurd. Within three hours, he is obliged to experience and project a whole exceptional life which man takes a life time to cover. The actor creates his characters by slipping into their imaginary form and by transfusing his blood into their phantoms: The actor has three hours to be Iago or Alceste phedre of Gloucester. In that short space of time he makes them come to life and die on fifty square yards of boards Never has the absurd been so well illustrated or at such length. (The Myth of Sisyphus 74)

The conqueror, for Camus, is not a victorious general. His greatness cannot be measured in terms of the countries he has subdued or the territories he has seized. On the contrary, it lies in his profound protest against the creation or in his struggle against his fate. He is lucid; he knows that action is in itself useless. Still he rises in revolt against the metaphysical absurdity of his condition Prometheus, says Camus, is the first of the modern conquerors, who felt himself to be the equal of the gods: “the conquerors are merely those among men who are conscious enough of their strength to be sure of living constantly on those heights and fully aware of that grandeur.” (TMS 82)

Thus, the lover, the actor and the conqueror brings home by the very style of their lives the passion to exhaust everything that is given. Still they do not propose a moral code; it is enough to be aware .Though these princes are without a kingdom yet the absurd gives them a royal power. They see clearly and have ceased to hope. The nobility and grandeur of such princes stems from their awareness that their activities are useless. But the absence of hope does not derive them to despair. For them, the flames of the earth are worth heavenly aroma.

**The Myth of Sisyphus**

In the concluding chapter, which bears the little of the book, Camus drops his style of abstract philosophizing and provides a fictional account of Sisyphus who, as Thody claims, “incarnates all the virtues of the absurd.”3 Man’s fate, says Chandra, “is best symbolized by Sisyphus.”

Sisyphus, a legendary hero, was punished in the underworld for his wrong doings with a futile and hopeless labour. He was condemned to rolling a rock to the summit of a mountain which barely attained its target, it reeled back towards the bottom from where he ceaselessly raised it again.

There are conflicting versions about the misdeeds committed by this king of Corinth. It is suggested that Aegina, the daughter of Aesopus, was abducted by Jupiter. Sisyphus told Aesopus the secret of his daughter’s abduction in exchange of water for the people of Corinth and so invited the wrath of Jupiter. It is also said that Sisyphus imprisoned death and by doing so annoyed Pluto. Another view pinpoints that after his death, when he was in the infernal region, he sought permission from Pluto to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But no sooner did he see the smiles of the earth again, he had refused to return to the nether world. Ultimately, he was dragged by Mercury to the underworld where his rock was awaiting him.

All of these projections reveal Sisyphus as a man whose love of life and passion for this earth
subjected him to an indescribable punishment. The first version makes it clear that Sisyphus preferred the favors of water in this world to ethereal thunderbolts of another world. The second account throws light on his contempt for death. The third story throws light on his attachment for earthly joys. As such Sisyphus is an ideal absurd hero. Camus says, “His scorn of gods, his hatred of death and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing. (TMS 108).

In the intervals of his toil when Sisyphus leaves the height and gradually returns to the rock with his burdensome yet calculated steps, he is fully aware of the futility of his endless suffering. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and Rebellious knows, the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (TMS 109)

Sisyphus represents Camus’s notion of the conqueror. As already discussed, the conqueror, for Camus, is a man who knows the uselessness of his protest against absurdity and injustice yet he decides to fight to the finish. In the midst of his struggles against destiny, it is the lucidity of his mind that brings Sisyphus the crowning victory:

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning towards his rock, in that slight pivoting, he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death. (The Myth of Sisyphus 110).

In this way, Sisyphus makes of fate a human matter which must be settled among men. He understands that outside the single fatality of death, he is the author of his days. His fate belongs to him; his rock is his thing. His happiness emerges from his struggle against the metaphysical absurdity of his existence: “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”. (The Myth of Sisyphus 111).

Conclusion

To conclude, in The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus examines two kinds of suicide, physical and philosophical and rejects both. In Camus’s universe, as Hinchliffe said, “Man must accept the feeling of absurdity which then becomes a springboard for action, giving him a sense of freedom and passion,” Consequently, the absurd man recognizes the amazing grandeur of human mind and feels himself to be the equal of gods. Provoked by the lucidity of his mind, he enters the exile and dominates it. He knows that there is no sun without shadow and so he wants to experience the night. His victory coincides with his happiness in the midst of his struggles against his destiny. Thody is not off the marks when he asserts that, far from being a pointless lament, The Myth of Sisyphus underlines a positive reality that “the absurdity of the world was paradoxically enough, an invitation to happiness.”

NOTES & REFERENCES


