The Fall Study Guide

The Fall by Albert Camus

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Contents

The Fall Study Guide....................1

Contents....................2

Plot Summary....................3

Chapter 1....................5

Chapter 2....................8

Chapter 3....................11

Chapter 4....................15

Chapter 5....................20

Chapter 6....................24

Characters....................28

Objects/Places....................29

Social Concerns And Themes....................31

Techniques....................32

Themes....................33

Style....................38

Quotes....................40

Adaptations....................41

Topics for Discussion....................42

Literary Precedents....................43

Copyright Information....................44

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Plot Summary

In a bar in 20th century Amsterdam, the narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence - a one-time Parisian lawyer and power-hungry narcissist - meets a fellow French ex-patriot and former lawyer. Through a lengthy, one-sided discussion of his own unprincipled life and ideas, Clamence succeeds in unburdening himself and demoralizing his companion.

Clamence at first appears to be friendly and helpful, acting as intercessor for a fellow displaced Frenchman and the Dutch-speaking bartender, but he soon becomes more than just a Good Samaritan. The monologue that follows is far from everyday chit-chat. Clamence speaks of the corrupting influence of modern society on simple minds, bourgeois character, and human nature generally. He introduces himself as a "judge-penitent" - a paradoxical profession that Clamence will take the entire narrative to explain. There is a suggestion toward the middle of the first chapter that Clamence's companion is attempting to disengage himself. He prepares to leave, asking Clamence for directions to his hotel. Clamence's response is not to provide the information for which he is asked, but to insist on accompanying the man almost to his doorstep. As the text moves along, however, Clamence's companion becomes more and more involved in Clamence's narrative, going to the extreme of visiting the man at home where he lies nursing a high fever.

Walking with his companion after their first meeting, Clamence introduces a few subjects which will carry through to the end: the double nature and the violence of modern man as well as the resemblance of Amsterdam to Dante's Inferno. This talk is meant to reinforce the idea established by the book's title: *The Fall*. Clamence and his companion are members of a fallen society existing in a forsaken world.

With only very rare interruptions from his companion - interruptions that are not reproduced in the text - Clamence goes on to give an account of his life and philosophies. He explains his belief in the necessity of slavery, his cynical views about human relationships, and his lack of religion. Despite what it seems at the outset, Clamence's primary goal is not confession and certainly not absolution. As a judge-penitent, he is the one to decide both his blame and his punishment. Clamence's real intention is to dishearten anyone with whom he comes into contact through the telling of his wretched story.

He was, he tells his companion, a defense attorney in Paris specializing in particularly desperate cases - murderers who kill to gain notoriety, the poor, and the oppressed. He does not take these cases out of a sense of benevolence, but rather as a way of acquiring fame for himself. His ego is limitless and his sense of need to be adored overpowering. For a very long time, he lives without self-doubt - utilizing his considerable natural gifts to maintain a sense of success. One night, however, he is the sole witness when a young woman throws herself from a bridge to her death. This is a turning point for Clamence. Though he wants to save the young woman, he finds himself paralyzed by fear. For the first time in his life he realizes the extent of his own weakness. Certainly this incident continues to haunt Clamence through the rest of the

text, but it is only when combined with another episode that the woman's suicide becomes so destructive to Clamence's frail skeleton of conceit and self-righteousness. On another night, crossing another bridge, Clamence hears laughter behind him. Turning, he sees no one. This signals a change in Clamence's frame of mind - the full implications of which even Clamence himself may not realize. Because the laughter does not come from anyone outside of him, it must be instead an echo of his own mind. Clamence has begun to see himself as ridiculous. Naturally, he fights this understanding with all of the weapons in his arsenal, but ultimately the laugh wins out. In the final pages of the text, Clamence reveals that - despite everything he thinks he has gained - he still hears the laughter now and again.

The Fall ends with a very ill Jean-Baptiste Clamence explaining, finally, his whole purpose of raising himself up by putting others down. Having learned the secret of his own form of happiness, Clamence indulges himself in everything, every impulse - even the possession of a stolen painting from a 15th century altarpiece. Most importantly, however, Clamence finally feels adored.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Fall opens with the narrator acting as interpreter for an unnamed companion. Both men are French, more specifically Parisian, ex-patriots passing time in a Dutch bar peculiarly labeled "Mexico City." The bartender, called a "worthy ape" by the narrator, speaks only Dutch, obliging the novel's anonymous second person to accept the help of the narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence. The two men settle in for a conversation over their glasses of gin, though it rapidly becomes apparent that Clamence will permit little or no interjection from his compatriot.

The narrator first begins by expounding on the character of the bartender, speaking of him as effectively deaf - as a monolinguist in the polyglottal world of his bar - and nearly mute. He is silent and animalistic, with a touchy distrust of everyone and everything around him.

Paris is the next subject undertaken by Clamence and from that point, using Amsterdam and its population as a contrast, he enters into a dissertation on modern, bourgeois man. Paris - modern society - is a *trompe -l' oeil*, inhabited by superficial men and women who have but two passions: ideas and fornication. Amsterdam, on the other hand, is plodding and rather stupid, infected either "by too much or too little imagination." The narrator, however, professes more respect for the middle-class morals of the Dutch than the values and behaviors of more modern society. The ape-like bartender returns once more with more gin and the narrator - who, to this point, has remained nameless - gives his name to his companion (and, so, to the reader, as well) and tells his occupation. He is Jean-Baptiste Clamence, "judge-penitent." This tag will crop up again and again as Camus gradually reveals the personality and philosophy of his protagonist. His own identity aside, Clamence takes some pains to discover a few of the qualities possessed by his fellow ex-patriot. In short, the auditor is a "cultured bourgeois" of similar age and appearance to the narrator. Within the text, however, the other man acts as nothing more than an anonymous sounding board.

Seemingly wearied by Clamence's monologue, the auditor rises to leave, but is pursued by Clamence who insists that he show the other man to his hotel. As they walk, Clamence dredges up shockingly violent images, such as Nazi genocide and the senseless disemboweling of a defenseless pacifist, and uses them as an explanation for any little hesitation his instincts toward fraternization might suffer. Having struck that lurid note, Clamence changes beats. He speaks lyrically of gin and the city in which the pair now walks, but his tone changes again when he speaks of Amsterdam's canals resembling the concentric circles of Hell described in Dante's *Inferno*. He explains that he awaits displaced Europeans in the "Mexico City." For the moment, his reasons for awaiting these travelers remains unclear, but there he patiently sits in the innermost circle of his synthetic Hell.

The narrator and his audience of one part company at a bridge near the anonymous man's hotel. Clamence never crosses bridges at night for reasons he does not yet explain, but about which he does hint. He leaves his compatriot with an injunction to take advantage of the local prostitutes.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The Fall opens in a bar in Amsterdam. This bar is named the "Mexico City," perhaps to suggest its international clientele, and is presided over by a silent and distrustful Dutchman. The narrator, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, familiar with the bartender and his establishment, speaks of these seedy circumstances as representing the modern European world as a whole. Using the bartender as a symbol, Clamence accuses the Dutch as being an ignorant species of humanity which does not understand the injustice the rest of the modern European world is capable of. Clamence and his new companion, both French ex-patriots, stand in for modern bourgeois man and his hidden evils.

The narrator introduces himself as a former lawyer who now acts as something he calls a "judge-penitent." At this early stage, the clearest quality of that title is its paradoxical nature. Clamence is, at once, in charge of censure and judged to be a sinner. But the questions of whom he judges, what he himself has been condemned for, and who has condemned him, are still obscure.

The name which Clamence gives himself, Jean-Baptiste, is perhaps easier to understand. Like the Biblical John the Baptist heralding the coming of Christ, Clamence believes himself to be a modern prophet for a society without a savior.

Clamence now takes over the problem of his companion's identity. This quick sketch is the primary information we are to gain concerning the auditor's character. Like Clamence, he is in his forties, bourgeois, and not always as generous as he could be. Clamence calls him a Sadducee, referring to a well-to-do Jewish sect who, among other things, denied the immortality of the soul and perhaps played a major role in the execution of Jesus. Though Clamence may not seem overly critical of his companion at this point, his remarks are far from complimentary. In short, the man becomes the incarnation of superficial, selfish, modern humankind.

If Clamence's profession as judge-penitent is made up of two, apparently conflicting, aspects, just as he says, humanity is doubled. This can be observed, for instance, in a tale Clamence tells of a Nazi soldier asking a mother, with every appearance of politeness, which of her two sons should be executed. The paradox of such courtesy overlaying such atrocity demonstrates the degree to how two apparently opposite human traits can manifest themselves at the same time.

Clamence's companion expresses a need to return to his hotel and the two step into the cold, fog, and drizzle. Watching Amsterdam's denizens go about their business in their black, broad-brimmed hats, Clamence tells his companions that, like sleep-walkers,

these men and women dream their lives in Amsterdam while they more truly inhabit the islands of Indonesia and worship its primitive gods. His narrative is again demonstrating the dual nature of human life, as well as further establishing the way in which the Dutch live at a remove from modern European society.

Clamence begins to wind up the chapter by asking his companion if he notices the similarities between Amsterdam's canals and the concentric circles of Hell in Dante's *Inferno.* Assuming that the book's title, *The Fall*, refers to a fall from grace into a hell of some kind, this coincidence is not terribly surprising. What does cause some consternation, however, is Clamence's assertion that they stand in the last circle of Hell - the center where traitors, such as Judas Iscariot and Lucifer himself, as well as traitors to country or murderers of guests - are kept in eternal torment. Clamence may be revealing his own life of deception or simply asserting that all modern men are traitors to something. Likewise, both hypotheses may be true along with other, more obscure possibilities.

Clamence's declaration that he never crosses bridges at night strikes the reader's ear as yet another eccentricity in a narrator who has already shown himself fairly peculiar. However, as he elaborates on the subject, one begins to wonder if this is more than simply an idiosyncrasy. Clamence will gradually, throughout the rest of the book, reveal the context of his self-imposed prohibition. Clamence asks his companion what he would do were he to witness a suicide. The narrator, as he later reveals, witnessed just such an event when a young woman jumped from a bridge he was crossing one night. The observer, Clamence asserts, is left with one of two equally unpleasant choices: jump and try to rescue the victim, risking your own life, or simply walk away. When tried in this way himself, Clamence chooses the latter option. At this point in the novel, however, the audience is only aware of Clamence's general injunction and so he seems merely un-heroic not inhuman, as he later becomes.

Clamence's final words induce his auditor to try the charms of the local brothel. Though he waxes lyrical, Clamence cannot entirely obscure the reality of his subject. In fact, the excess of his high rhetoric serves only to degrade his proposal. Using the same tone and even the same words he employed in his earlier discussion of Dutch innocence and incorruptibility, his manner must be read as sardonic. In this way, he also calls into question his romantic notions about the Dutch as a people. Far from innocent, they have their vices just as any other nation.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The first line of Chapter 2 finally asks the question that has been plaguing the reader since Clamence's introduction: "What is a judge-penitent?" In Chapter 1, Clamence presents this as his profession but makes no effort to explain it. Likewise, in Chapter 2, he takes his time before he gives any explanation.

Previously a defense attorney of some note in Paris, Clamence acted as advocate for only the most desperate of cases, appearing the very bedfellow of justice and using his natural gifts as a lawyer to convey his righteousness and restrained indignation at the state of society. However, as Clamence continues his one-sided discussion, he shows himself to be not the fiery supporter of the degraded and the destitute, but an egotist obsessed with doing good - giving alms to the poor with alacrity, maintaining a stringent courtesy, and going out of his way to help the blind cross busy streets in order that he might gain the pleasure of virtue.

All of his selfless actions combine to push the narrator far above the run of ordinary mankind - he contrives to place himself on a pedestal through his generosity. It is on these heights that Clamence explains he is obliged to live. He simply cannot tolerate anything but the loftiest peaks.

Blessed with a cache of natural gifts and a mind and body in complete harmony, he feels himself above his modest origins as an officer's son and harbors a firm belief in his own superiority. But Clamence does break into the narrative for a moment to suggest that, from the heights he climbs, he eventually falls. As his story progresses, Clamence will explain this fall. Also at this point, Clamence begins to speed up his tale. His activities become more frivolous and his energy more manic as he hurtles toward his fate. Jumping from festivity to festivity, dancing for nights on end, Clamence is less the socially conscious lawyer he once impersonated and seems more an out of control socialite. Once more, he interjects in order to foreshadow vaguely his ultimate descent. He calls this event the "evening when the music stopped and the lights went out."

Clamence's next subject is friends and relations. He says the death of a person draws them nearer to us than they might ever have been in life. Because we owe the dead nothing, he says, we are free in our affection. In addition, a death offsets for a time the boredom of modern life. He goes on to illustrate a few examples of this phenomenon. Finally the auditor interrupts to ask more explanation along some other line of conversation. This explanation is never given. Instead, Clamence goes on to describe the feelings of power and domination that filled him at that most frantic time of his life. It is here, however, that the trouble Clamence has hinted at through the chapter begins to reveal itself. Standing on the Pont des Arts and looking out over the river, his superiority and conceit at a fever pitch, Clamence hears behind him the sound of laughter. He turns to find the street deserted.

Here the compatriots must part company, but the incident of the laughter will appear through the remaining chapters of the book. Clamence gestures to another man in the bar - a burglar and a killer - who requires his consultation.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The narrator opens Chapter 2 by speaking of his work as a well-known lawyer in Paris who defended hard-luck cases. He revels in his work as well as in his daily acts of charity, but his generosity is entirely self-serving. He gains satisfaction and joy in righteousness because he believes that, from the outside, he appears virtuous.

In describing his law practice, Clamence refers to himself as a *deus ex machina* - a figure in ancient Greek and Roman theatre that would be lowered to the stage by means of a crane in order to restore order and to pronounce the play's final outcome. He claims this role for himself as an accurate metaphor of his work with the demoralized criminals of Paris. These men - many of them murderers - become criminals in response to the anonymity conferred by modern society. They are desperately searching a way of distinguishing themselves from the rest of nameless citizens. Clamence seeks a similar satisfaction but, rather than commit a single crime which will soon be forgotten, he remains constantly attached to crime - reaping its dubious rewards - but out of the reach of retribution

However crooked, Clamence's way of life comes naturally to him and he is successful in it. He is intoxicated with his own gifts and talents and believes himself a superman. Though lacking religious faith of any kind, Clamence feels himself especially blessed and marked out by some higher power. Without God as judge, the narrator's blessings must be granted by a human agency of some kind, most likely public opinion. Buoyed by the fame and repute brought him by his law career, Clamence soars above average society. From that height, he is in a position to judge those who put him on that pedestal. As the narrator climbs ever higher, Camus' title again becomes significant. Clamence is headed for a fall as is his captive audience.

As the chapter progresses, the rising action that marked the first few pages begins to give way to mania, but as Clamence comes to the point in his narrative where his frenetic energy begins to wane, he stops to ask his companion for understanding. From here he moves into a discussion of understanding, friendship, and finally death. He takes a cynical view of friendship. Friends will not call when you most need them and despair over your obligations to them may push you to suicide. Likewise, understanding is a mediocre emotion, at best, but of some minor comfort. Only the death of a person can rouse affection for that person. Among other examples of this phenomenon, Clamence tells the story of a young woman who, after pursuing him in vain, finally commits suicide. Immediately following her death, Clamence's feelings change from indifference to deep sorrow and, from there, to self-accusation. Here, as in much of the book, Clamence seems to act as a surrogate conscience for modern mankind, calling our noble feelings into question and pointing to our inhumanity.

Following a particularly successful day, Clamence stands on the Pont des Arts and looks out over the deserted bridge. Suddenly he hears laughter behind him. This ghostly laughter, which will continue to haunt the narrator throughout the rest of the text, represents his underlying fear that he is not as admirable as he believes himself to be. His smile in the mirror that evening brings with it the first hints of self-doubt.

As Clamence finishes his tale for the day, he gestures to a man in the bar, a criminal with whom he must talk. Apparently, in addition to being a judge-penitent, Clamence continues to carry on as a law consultant on the side, perhaps as a means of achieving the high he experienced while in Paris. He finishes by asserting that if every criminal - like the one in the bar - were sentenced, everyone not carrying a sentence would assume themselves perfectly innocent - a state that is not possible in a fallen society.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The ghostly laughter heard on the Pont des Arts is the first item of discussion in Chapter 3. Apparently Clamence has piqued the curiosity of the auditor with his odd, hallucinatory story. Clamence insists that he rarely thought of that laugh during his time in Paris. However, the laugh from this point forward is to occupy a central position in the story. Furthermore, in spite of the nonchalance with which Clamence tells the tale of the laughter, he admits that from then on he ceased walking the Paris quays and, when riding along them in a car or in a bus, he would find himself silenced by the memory, as if waiting for something to happen.

Next Clamence confesses to some physical and psychological problems that began to plague him at this point in his life, overturning his formerly exceptional health. During this discussion, Clamence admits to his auditor that, even as he tells his story, he feels somewhat unwell and ineloquent. The narrator's fall has begun in earnest.

The sight of a former slave trader's sign induces Clamence to begin a dissertation on power. Though he advocates the outward condemnation of slavery, Clamence in fact believes in its necessity. Without the strict dynamic of master and servant, any argument could stretch on into infinity, argues Clamence. The philosophy here is straightforward: the responsibility of decision falls ultimately to the most powerful party who must officially end uncertainty on the topic. An example of this use of power is the manner in which modern man communicates. All talk is one-sided. Of course, Clamence himself is the personification of this hypothesis. Through the whole of the narrative, he is in command, allowing no comment from his companion.

Again Clamence picks up the subject of shop-signs, suggested by that of the slave-trader. He asks his companion to bestow upon himself a sign, or a label, that would accurately summarize his character. Receiving no response or declining to wait for one, Clamence explains what his own sign would look like: a two-faced Janus with the motto "Don't rely on it." His cards would read : "John-Baptiste Clamence, play-actor." Given his unrelenting double talk, this self-identification is no surprise, nor is the confession that the narrator's acts of charity were always undertaken with ulterior motives. The knowledge of his own duplicity, Clamence claims, came to him little by little as he ceased forgetting his actions and motivations and was forced to remember them.

Clamence takes time out of his general expostulation to tell a story he believes illustrates his growing self-awareness. To summarize quickly, during a verbal altercation with a man on a stalled motorcycle, someone out of the crowd strikes Clamence in order to prevent him from physically attacking the motorcyclist. Clamence, dazed both by the blow itself and its implications for his character, returns to his car without retaliation. This is a public collapse. Clamence may not outwardly display cowardice but he is certainly guilty of passivity. Clamence is suddenly doomed to disgrace.

The narrator's relationships with women follow the philosophy and pattern of behavior he has already established in his confession. He is successful with the opposite sex, but only in the most superficial of terms. He is, quite simply, a sensualist. He shows his need for power by forcing his conquests into oaths of complete faithfulness while he himself displays no such virtue. The ideal situation for Clamence would be the death of his partner. In that way, he might continue in his feelings for her without any obligation to her. Taking this point to the most extreme level, Clamence confesses that true happiness for him would consist in having all the creatures of his interest waiting endlessly at his beck and call. He is a narcissist of the most absolute order.

In these last pages of Chapter 3, Clamence finally reveals his reason for not crossing bridges at night - a fact he introduces in Chapter 1. A few years prior to the ghostly laughter, Clamence is the only witness to the suicide of a young woman. Though his chances of saving her were slim to none, Clamence is haunted by the incident. He believes he hears a cry repeated several times, gradually growing less and less audible, recalling the downstream progress of the phantom laugh.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Clamence opens Chapter 3 by claiming that the phantom laughter rarely bothered him in the years that followed. He belies himself though, a moment later by revealing that not only was he not able to walk across the Pont des Arts again, but also when crossing them in a car or a bus, he sinks into an anxious silence. By claiming one reaction and illustrating another, Clamence reveals his duplicity as well as his persuasive technique.

Here, at the novel's midpoint, Clamence's spirits apparently begin to falter. Clamence is systematically working his way from the relative heights of chapters one and two down to a low point. Clamence is caught in an inevitable descent and Camus' title is implicit in the method of the tale's telling.

Clamence observes a sign for a slave trader's shop which prompts him to two separate lines of discussion. First he asserts that slavery is both natural and necessary to society. Nevertheless, slavery is not something that should be flaunted - the master should exercise power without ostentation and the slave should serve with a smile. In that way, modern conscience is not disturbed. Secondly, the shop-sign is a reminder of the labels under which individuals might be constrained. To the narrator, who has gone to such lengths to identify himself - both by taking up an assumed name and by espousing a double-sided profession - such constraint is nothing short of hell.

A tenacious forgetfulness enables Clamence's narcissism, and the loss of this forgetfulness signals the beginning of an awakening for Clamence. Up until the incident on the bridge, Clamence's amnesia allows him to live without self-awareness. Here though, Clamence is forced to recall a public incident in which all of his usual courtesy and righteousness gives him no advantage. Indeed, they work against him. A man on a stalled motorcycle, far from wanting his assistance or succumbing to his charm, meets Clamence with threats and swearing. Unaccustomed to such a reception, in fact

indignant over the man's boorishness, Clamence moves to correct him. On some level, Clamence must believe that he is doing the public a service by fiercely discouraging such behavior. However, from the crowd that has gathered to watch the altercation, a man emerges and strikes Clamence in order to prevent him from attacking the man on the motorcycle. This is such a significant event because not only is Clamence made a fool of in public, but also he learns that he is not always on the right side of things. Suddenly brought down from the heights on which he had lived, Clamence sinks into resentment. From resentment he progresses into revenge, and from revenge into fantasies of repression. He has progressed from would-be superman to a simple bully. Furthermore, Clamence discovers that his sympathy for the guilty extends only so far as he is not the victim of their crime. If and when he is victimized, he becomes the harshest of judges. Realizing this, Clamence further realizes that he cannot continue as a defender of the guilty and oppressed.

Clamence's next self-discovery is his sensuality. As in his law practice, Clamence's natural gifts allow him to gain all the enjoyment he requires from a romantic relationship without delving beyond the superficial. Furthermore, these liaisons keep Clamence's mind on primarily insignificant personal matters and absolve him from the responsibility of exploring any major problems in society. In spite of the high-tone Clamence's speech often takes, he rarely speaks of anyone or anything larger than himself. As such, Camus presents him as an allegory of modern man.

In his affairs, Clamence repeatedly takes a certain tack which he explains to his companion as if it were a theatrical sequence he had devised. Here, the reader might be aware of an irony that escapes Clamence. The items highlighted in the speech - the emptiness of his life, his inability to achieve happiness - are patently true. As he himselfadmits, he believes his own tale, but he is not able to go beyond this admission and see that the tale is in fact the truth. Instead he sees this performance as a further demonstration of his natural gifts and thus he feeds his own narcissism.

Clamence claims that his own conceit keeps him from believing that a woman he had once possessed could content herself with any other man. Nevertheless, he insists that any woman he becomes involved with swears an oath always to remain faithful to him. At that point, his desire is spent and he is able to break off the relationship without a second thought. Whatever vanity he claims, Clamence reveals himself to be insecure and sadistic. He does doubt his gifts and realizes the strong possibility that a woman can be happy with another man after leaving or being left by him. In addition, he does not only not worry over the unpleasantness he causes the woman in question, but seems to take a kind of twisted pleasure in it. He needs fidelity, but does not want to be loved. Just as Clamence is unable to feel affection for a friend until he is dead and therefore cannot require anything of him, he does not want a woman to love him because of the responsibility that being loved carries with it. But a woman's enduring faithfulness feeds his ego without obliging him in any way.

Clamence further states that after a time, he begins only to go through the motions of desire, taking what he does not want. He presents this as an inevitable scenario and, indeed, for him it is. By taking what he does not desire, Clamence proves to himself that

he is in control. His affairs become ever intensifying plays for power. One of these affairs, with an over-eager, passive woman, whose very weakness is what attracts Clamence to her, surprises him with her initiative and causes Clamence another moment of self-doubt and ridicule. The woman, after her split with Clamence, relates his flaws to a third party. Clamence admits to feeling deceived that the woman he believed so submissive apparently has a mind of her own. However he does not admit to the disgrace this causes him, at least not explicitly. But he does say that when he recalled this incident, he laughed at himself - a laugh that recalls the one he heard on the Pont des Arts. Again, the reader must be alerted to the irony of the narrator's situation. He laughs at himself, but does not seem to understand what this laughter signifies. All of his feelings of power, his arrogance, and his natural gifts are delusions. His pomposity renders him absurd and on some level even he knows it.

His self-importance, however, is so extreme that he can only derive happiness from dominating the people in his life. Ideally, no one in his life would have an existence apart from him. Clamence would keep everyone in his circle at his beck and call. At this point, Clamence claims some shame at this memory. In fact, he suggests that- following the incident on the Pont des Arts he lived constantly with shame. But it is difficult to take this seeming piece of self-awareness seriously. He speaks with pride of his attempts to sidestep his disgrace, and even expresses uncertainty that shame is the emotion he really feels. Here, as in so many other instances, Clamence shows himself to be of two minds. On one hand, he admits the smirch on his honor. On the other hand, it is hard to tell how deep his understanding is.

Here, the narrator tells another traumatic story of crossing a bridge at night. Going home across the Pont Royal, two or three years before the phantom laughter, Clamence is witness to a young woman's suicide by plunging into the river. Clamence is very clearly unsettled by this experience. He stands shivering and shocked, trying to assure himself that there was no way he could have prevented the tragedy. This rare moment of humanity in Clamence is complicated by the casual way in which he admits to his auditor that he did not bother to read the papers the following day in order to find out the fate of the young woman. Clamence could still be harboring guilt over the incident and therefore finds it difficult to address. On the other hand, he could be as callous as he seems. Because he chooses to tell this story to his companion, but when questioned further brushes the question aside, it seems that the second hypothesis is closer to the truth. Certainly he must feel badly about what happened that evening on the bridge, but he is not above using the anecdote for his own purposes with few if any qualms. Clamence is telling his own story for his own reasons and the death of a young woman is incidental.

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Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 finds Clamence and his companion in a quaint, stereotypically Dutch part of town, but Clamence is not seduced by such charm. Such easy enjoyments are open to anyone. Clamence, however, asserts that he can show his auditor the truth that lurks behind the pretty façade. This underlying environment is gray, wet, and devoid of people. Only the sky, full of doves, offers any company to the two men. Carried away by a metaphor suggested by the doves, Clamence demonstrates an inability to follow the thread of his own conversation. He uses this descending confusion as a loose segue into the subject of his lack of friends and then moves into suicide.

Clamence begins by asserting that he has no friends, only accomplices in some plot he alone understands. This realization of friendlessness came when Clamence began to contemplate suicide. His killing himself was meant to be a manner in which to play on the emotions of those who most cared for him. But, Clamence concludes, there were no such people. Besides, he reasons, the only reason for suicide is to observe the effect of his death on other people and obviously, that is impossible. In short, Clamence is too self-obsessed ever to put an end to himself.

From here, Clamence skips quickly to a somewhat different topic. The goal of living, he says, is not to avoid punishment, but to avoid judgment. This fear of judgment was born the moment Clamence began to believe himself capable of disgrace in that incident with the stalled motorcyclist. Suddenly understanding that he might be called to account for some flaw or defect in himself, he began to obsess over the idea that everyone was not only judging him, but attempting to make a fool of him. The laughter from the Pont des Arts shows in every face.

For a time, however, the narrator's life continues on as before with praise and apparent ease, but now all of his successes only rouse further his sense of being harshly judged. Thoughts of death enter the picture, and Clamence is plagued by a fierce impulse to confess all of his sins to a friend or a beloved woman. Finally he can no longer bear his own duplicity. His initial reaction is extreme. He fantasizes about assaulting the blind on the street and makes outlandish speeches vilifying the oppressed people he once defended. He offends atheists by speaking of God and writes poetry that speaks about the virtues of things he formerly thought of as tyrannous. But finding no lasting comfort in these juvenile provocations, he falls into a deeply forlorn state in which he continues to hear the damning laughter.

Chapter 4 ends with Clamence promising to define the "judge-penitent" but warning that he has two other subjects to be dealt with first.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The second half of the novel opens with Clamence calling attention to the quaintness of Amsterdam. He uses it as a contrast to the sheer hellishness of the landscape the further they get from the picturesque houses, and the closer they get to the dike. Clamence and his companion are the only people against this damp, gray backdrop. From total self-absorption, Clamence progresses to a relatively firm relationship with the auditor. The two of them now face the world together. Clamence now refers to the other man not simply as a compatriot but as a dear friend.

Over their heads, the sky heaves and closes in around them with the fluttering of a mass of doves. The doves must remain high in the atmosphere because, Clamence says, there is nothing on which to light except canals and roofs covered with shop signs. The metaphor is rather obscure and Clamence admits here that he has lost the thread of what he is saying, but what Clamence seems to be referring to is Christ's baptism in the New Testament. During his baptism by John - Clamence's first name, the reader must remember, is Jean-Baptiste - a dove descends on Christ from heaven. The doves in Amsterdam represent an inversion of the Biblical story.Tthus Clamence becomes an inversion of the Biblical John the Baptist, further proving the corruption of the wet, gray hell in which the pair sits. From the air, the doves see only the canals(which Clamence compares to the circles of Dante's Inferno), and the shop-signs(which symbolize the oppression an individual suffers from being labeled.) When looked upon from a great height, a height from which Clamence himself once professed to observe the world, society is hopeless.

Clamence goes on to say that where he used to have friends, he now possesses the entire human race as accomplices. Clamence realizes he has no friends when he begins to consider suicide as a means to punish these friends. But even with friends, Clamence understands that suicide would not fulfill his intention. Unable to observe the reaction and consequences of his death, putting an end to his life ceases to be an attractive scenario for Clamence. Still an egotist, Clamence has nevertheless lost the arrogance and the conceit he demonstrates throughout the earlier part of his tale. He feels now that he has something to prove. Only his death can galvanize the seriousness with which he holds his convictions. Clamence moves quickly from this sentiment however, to one that is more in keeping with his character. Not a man of principles and therefore unwilling to sacrifice himself for an abstraction or an idea, Clamence is a performer who acts in order to elicit a reaction. With no friends to act as an audience to his suicide, Clamence ultimately rejects suicide as a way in which to give his life meaning.

Worse still is the way suicides and martyrs are seen by society. Inevitably misunderstood, the suicide is mocked, exploited, or - most terrible of all - forgotten. Here again Clamence expresses the misery of losing control over one's own identity. The deceased is helpless against being pigeonholed and condemned to someone else's perceptions. Like shop signs, the judgment of the dead by the living cannot be argued.

This discussion of suicide also recalls what Clamence says earlier about obligation to the dead. In trying to punish friends, says Clamence, the suicide achieves exactly the opposite, and in fac, frees them. He tells the story of a girl who kills herself in order to punish her father. Three weeks after his daughter's death, the man is back to his usual pastime of fly-casting. In his typical cynical tone, Clamence suggests that memory is short and mourning even shorter.

Clamence then goes onto offer another, more fundamental reason for his not committing suicide: he loves life. This love of life, says Clamence, is plebian. The aristocracy conducts itself with more gravity. Clamence seems to be suggesting that, while the lower classes love life for life itself, the upper class exists in a more abstract condition, imagining its life a little separate from life in general. Here, Clamence accomplishes two things. First, he presents himself as someone who participates fully in existence - a remarkable revelation from someone who was just speaking of suicide. Second, he aligns himself with the lower class, which stands in contrast to his earlier discussion of himself as living high above the rest of humanity.

Aristocracy will sacrifice itself for an ideal if necessary, while Clamence continues to love himself and therefore is open to compromise. Even knowing his own defects, he esteems himself so highly that he continues to censure others without reservation. Clamence is not troubled by his distorted rationale. He even revels in it. Clamence's main concern is not to improve his philosophies or value system, but to avoid judgment - the same judgment he himself doles out so readily. He can accept punishment without judgment. Punishment is straightforward and inconsequential, while being judged, according to Clamence's shallow life view, actually changes an individual's identity according to the sentence or the opinion that is ultimately pronounced.

Being judged, Clamence says, should be avoided at all costs. He compares going into society to being an animal-tamer with a shaving-cut. Just as the tamer is vulnerable to attack with the smell of blood on him, the individual who shows any weakness is open to censure. Comparing modern society to wild animals, Clamence speaks with his usual cynicism and with a certain underlying fear that is not so evident in the earlier part of the novel. The public accusation he now feels has become brutal, and all of Clamence's friends and acquaintances seem to have lined up before him as judges at the bar. Clamance's extraordinary arrogance has turned to paranoia so powerful that it causes him to trip and fall in public places. As earlier, Clamence still feels singled out, marked, but those feelings have turned negative. For the first time, Clamence realizes that he has enemies and that these enemies fall into three separate classes: people who know him in the context of his career as a lawyer, people who know him in the context of his social life, and people who barely know him at all. The first two classes Clamence can accept, but the last disturbs him because it forces him to alter his perception of himself. Despite his cynicism, Clamence is quite naïve when it comes to his grasp of his own charms. He believes himself irresistible at a distance, but Clamence's self-obsession insults anyone who might make overtures of friendship toward him. Clamence puts his own spin on this phenomenon, believing the resentment is caused not by his blatant rudeness, but by the fullness of his life - a fullness that prevents him from behaving politely toward those who do approach him. Happiness, for Clamence, is a double-

edged sword. To remain happy he feels he must maintain a certain distance from people, but his aloofness leaves him open to criticism, judgment, and spite. To neutralize this bitterness, Clamence must sacrifice happiness.

As soon as Clamence realizes the disapproval with which he is seen, he begins to feel ridiculed by the entire universe. The energy that fueled his earlier vanity has twisted to drive his feelings of inadequacy and absurdity, and only his own spite and censure can answer the spite and censure Clamence feels directed at him by this laughing universe. As before, Clamence's perception of himself remains horribly distended. He believes that he looms as large in the consciousness of others as he does in his own, and so his scorn and resentment extend everywhere all at once. But, again, Clamence takes a perverse pride in his negativity. Wise men, he says may be able to rise above the condemnation of their fellows, but their poise only proves that they are not truly alive. As usual, Clamence lacks the imagination to consider an example other than his own. Because Clamence lives with a constant, gnawing spitefulness, everyone must live thus. If someone lacks that spitefulness, they are not truly alive.

Clamence states that all human beings wish to be praised for their natural innocence, to be seen as possessing intrinsic grace.In other words, they wish to deny the original sin that, according to Christianity, all mankind incurs as a result of Adam and Eve's fall. The more people wish to be exceptional, the more they become indistinguishable from their peers. Everyone wishes to be admired without being judged and, due to the near impossibility of this, all people strive for wealth and the defense wealth affords. As Clamence states earlier, in addition to the power that wealth brings, the aristocracy lives at a remove from the rest of society and thereforeare that much safer from the damning opinion of the crowd.

Here, Clamence again moves onto the subject of friends - a subject on which he is obviously unreliable as he himself admits the singular trouble he has with friendship. Friends, he says, do not wish honesty. They wish to have their egos fed and their insecurities soothed. Duplicity is the only way, then, to maintain a friendship. One must promise to tell the truth but, when the time comes, lie. Clamence again shows up as the two-faced Janus of Chapter 3.

Because people wish to be encouraged rather than criticized, they do not turn to their betters for friendship, but to their equals for sympathy. Humankind is more willing to remain in limbo between good and evil than be advised on how to improve itself. In Clamence's world view, everyone is not only fallen but lazy.

Clamence's companion breaks in at this point to suggest that humanity - as it sits in this neutral zone between heaven and hell - must be patient. Clamence argues, however, that humanity is inescapably impatient. In his case, for instance, hearing the laughter of his contemporaries compels him immediately to become a judge-penitent. His first task as judge-penitent is to study himself. In this study, he discovers that he is not as straightforward as he once believed, but that he is a collection of paradoxes and dualities. He employs modesty to gain attention, humility to gain power, and apparent goodness to dominate. In discovering this about himself, he assumes that it is the same

for all humanity. Hence, his profession as judge-penitent - he has pronounced the dissembling nature of humanity simultaneous to revealing it in himself, so he must repent his own sins even as he accuses others of theirs.

Even after making his unpleasant discoveries about himself, Clamence continues to live with a certain amount of admiration from his fellows. Clamence finally convinces himself, however, that his eventual death will be punishment enough for his years of perjury. Even death though, is ultimately not enough of a penalty. Clamence, at this point, is so demoralized that, from the compulsive do-gooder of the first pages of his tale, Clamence begins to fantasize about manhandling the blind as they try to cross the street and slapping infants in the subway. The reason for this outburst in Clamence is, perhaps, very simple. Knowing his own faults and defects and wishing to atone for them, he becomes enraged when other people don't immediately see his degradation.

From mere fantasies, Clamence moves into anti-social behavior. He publishes invectives against the people he once advocated. He writes poetry extolling the virtues of the machines of oppression he formerly claimed to despise, and so on. Having lost his own internal feeling of righteousness, he is desperate to throw off the admiration that has become so oppressive to him. His outrageous behavior, however, is not at first successful in making him hated - the phantom laughter continues, but now with in an almost fond tone to it. Seeking to reveal what he sees as his true, malevolent nature, Clamence only makes himself look more absurd and even childish.

The chapter ends with an ominous declaration about the coming night and the rising tide. Clamence promises again to explain further the judge-penitent, but before that, he introduces another topic to be discussed in the next chapter: the *little-ease*.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 opens with Clamence assuring his companion that the boat on which they travel is in fact moving at top speed, despite perceptual evidence to the contrary. Like the boat, Clamence has come to drift almost imperceptibly over his narrative and he begs his auditor to draw him from waxing lyrical on Greece back to the story at hand. Of course, we continue to hear only the words of Clamence and, of course, he continues in his own time to tell his tale.

Continuing on the subject of Greece, he tells how male friends in that country walk hand-in-hand in pure affection while the women remain at home. He contrasts this with the cynicism of Paris, where "decorum" disallows such public display. This social vignette concluded, Clamence ostensibly turns back to the topic of the "little-ease" first mentioned in the previous chapter. As usual, however, Clamence must work through a long digression before explaining his obscure reference. Following a stint of increasingly audacious behavior described in Chapter 4, Clamence, disheartened by the futility of his rebellion, decides to remove himself from the company of men and only to keep the company of women. In order to buoy his crushed spirits, Clamence contrives to convince himself that he is both loved and in love though his relationships are as hollow as ever. The inherent defects of this new strategy are brought to a head when Clamence falls in love with a woman who espouses the illusory theories of love found in romance novels. Because he himself is so lacking in any genuine understanding of love, he is susceptible to his partner's delusions and the two soon split. Following this failure, Clamence becomes yet more downtrodden and resolves to live a chaste life, though he will retain the friendship and society of women. Without the intrigues of passion and desire however, women bore Clamence and he, in turn, bores them. With neither male society nor female companionship, Clamence's life is utterly without interest. In an attempt to synthesize enthusiasm, he turns to debauchery.

For a time, promiscuity and depravity seem to be the solution to all of Clamence's problems. He is entertained without obligation and able to indulge once again in his tremendous self-love. Only liver disease can bring these delights to an end. From feeling immortal in his corruption, Clamence, as his inevitable physical illness descends, begins to wonder if he can survive the day.

Eventually though, Clamence is cured of his sclerosis. In order to celebrate he takes a cruise on an ocean liner. Here he undergoes a somewhat hallucinatory experience that recalls the much earlier suicide on the bridge. Standing on the ship's upper deck he observes a dark speck far off on the surface of the water. In a panic he turns away and nearly shouts for help before turning back to see not a human body, but only a piece of refuse. It is at this point that Clamence realizes fully that he had never recovered from the trauma incurred the night he heard the young woman plunge to her death.

Finally Clamence settles down to discuss the thing that closed the previous chapter and opened this one: the "little-ease." The little-ease is, according to Clamence, a detention cell employed in the Middle Ages. In it the prisoner can neither stand upright nor lie flat. As a result, his body becomes horribly stiffened. The explanation of this torture device provokes Clamence to a discussion of innocence and guilt - a discussion that he has been developing throughout the text. Public opinion alone, Clamence suggests, decides guilt or innocence. In other words, a man enclosed in the little-ease cannot, by definition, be innocent because he has already been judged guilty. Clamence than goes on to describe another means of punishing the guilty: the "spitting-cell." In this device this prisoner is obliged to stand upright, enclosed to his neck, and must endure being spat upon by every passing jailer. These are man's inventions, says Clamence, and God, who Clamence professes not to believe in, has had no hand in them just as He has no hand in proclaiming guilt or innocence.

Clamence then splits off into a discussion of Jesus Christ, the reasons for and the effects of his Crucifixion. Christ did not die, explains Clamence, because of mankind's guilt but because of His own lack of innocence. He went quietly to His crucifixion because he could not bear the idea of being the only one left alive. Clamence then goes on to indict those who have misunderstood the reasons for His death.

At the door of his home, Clamence presents himself to his companion as a modern prophet whose purpose is to curse "lawless men who cannot endure any judgment." Again he invokes the title of "judge-penitent" and again he delays its explanation.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The chapter opens with Clamence and his companion traveling on a boat deeply shrouded in fog. This recalls the river Styx - a river of the Underworld in Greek mythology. Clamence strengthens the association by proceeding straight into a discussion of Greece in which, unlike in Amsterdam, progress is evident due to the clear atmosphere and the many landmarks. Clamence remains on the subject of Greece even as he accuses himself of drifting from the true substance of his narrative. Greek society, according to Clamence, is more innocent than Parisian, at least in terms of the relationships between men. Men can walk hand in hand on the streets of Greece, which they cannot do in Paris. The corruption of Paris compels men to a cynicism that does not exist in untainted Greece. Clamence, here, speaks with a kind of nostalgia. Male friendships are not mitigated by the presence of women and sensual enjoyment is accepted as a way of life. Clamence's voice trails off at the end of his brief discussion of Greece, making a further case for his melancholy desire. Usually when Clamence takes on a topic of conversation, he drags it out to the maudlin, but here he seems too overwhelmed by wistfulness to continue.

From here, Clamence again picks up the subject of the little-ease introduced in Chapter 4. Having found all his attempts at audacity unsuccessful, he decides to quit the society of men. He decides, instead, to enjoy only the comforts of women, those last vestiges of an earthly paradise that stand as proof against the fall of mankind - both the Biblical one

and the one Clamence assumes. In this return to women, in contrast to his earlier relationships, he does not engage in any play-acting and his imagination has deserted him. This time around, Clamence is laid-low by his own need for love, or at least solace. Solace is not forthcoming, however, and after a failed affair with a woman who gains all of her ideas about romance from fictional stories, Clamence decides to undertake a life of chastity. Without the intrigue of an affair between them, woman bore Clamence, and he in turn bores them. Thus far, Clamence has given up the company of men and the love of women, robbing his life of the theatricality he used to thrive on and plunging himself headlong into reality. In this stagnant state, the phantom laughter must be deafening. To quiet it, Clamence turns to debauchery.

The debauchery into which Clamence descends is all of a piece with his self-love and his desperate wish for immortality. Though Clamence awakens in the morning to the knowledge of his own mortality, he spends his nights soaring the heights afforded him by alcohol, prostitutes, and other forms of depravity. Justice and righteousness have given way to decadence - the fall Clamence has taken is self-evident.

The debauched life, says Clamence, creates no obligations and is therefore liberating. This is not the first time Clamence has spoken of the enviable position of living without obligation. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that friends and other relations are preferable dead because in that state, one cannot owe them anything.

By giving into corruption, one leaves behind both fear and hope. The future, in other words, ceases to exist. The present, too, takes on a kind of stagnancy. Just as the boat at the beginning of the chapter seems not to be moving, days filled with debauchery blend one into another. There is little conversation and all the various women Clamence finds himself involved with are nameless and faceless. Eventually though, Clamence does become involved with two women who each have something of an identity. One is an aging prostitute, the other a young, upper-class girl. Clamence describes this situation as being much less frantic than his earlier life style. He seems to have slipped comfortably into a kind of domesticated sin. But this relative peace is short-lived. Liver disease caused by excessive drinking leaves Clamence wondering if he will live from one day to the next. His illness, however, has in his mind an up-side. Such excess as Clamence engages in has the effect of killing many of his desires, and therefore reducing his suffering. In other words, surfeit leads to exhaustion which ends the discomfort caused by longing.

During this time, Clamence continues to work as a lawyer. His debauchery causes much less resentment than did his earlier insolence, but his clients continue to dwindle, his friendships fall off, his affairs grow stale, and he falls into a state of total boredom - until another semi-hallucinatory moment. Riding on an ocean-liner, Clamence believes he sees a drowning figure behind the ship. In his panic, Clamence realizes that he has never shaken off the disturbance of the night when he witnessed the suicide years before. Clamence refers to his trauma as a baptism. Again, this is ironic given Clamence's first name: Jean-Baptiste. He is self-baptized and, rather than erasing sin, his sacrament confers it.

Finally, Clamence moves onto his discussion of the little-ease - a medieval torture device. A criminal would be placed in the little-ease which was, basically, a box too low to stand up in and too short to lie down. As time passed the victim's body would become horribly twisted and stiffened from being forced to maintain such unnatural positions. This, in essence, is what Clamence has done to himself. Far from believing in his own innocence and therefore being able to maneuver through his life with facility, he has boxed himself in with a combination of unreasonable aspirations and disgraceful behavior. Another torture-device Clamence introduces here is the spitting-cell. The spitting-cell is a box in which the criminal stands closed in up to his neck and spat upon by every passing officer of the law. Clamence's purpose in discussing these devices is to explain that belief in one's own innocence is futile if public opinion finds you guilty.

Here Clamence takes on Christian belief. If any person who undergoes punishment is by definition guilty, then Jesus too must have died for his own guilt and not for the sins of the world. Because he understood his guilt, Christ went willingly to the scaffold. But now, says Clamence, His death is misunderstood and exploited. Christians practice Christianity only to bring attention to themselves and have put Jesus in a place of judgment that was never intended by Him. Christ died in a state of irony, knowing that His name would be abused. There are judges both of Christ and of the Anti-Christ and they are identical in their function. They condemn according to their own tenets and keep humanity confined in the little-ease.

The conversation breaks off now as the pair have reached Clamence's door and he has become fatigued. He describes himself as a kind of feeble prophet - he is the end and the beginning and announces the law. With this first statement, he recalls Christ who states "I am the Alpha and the Omega," and with the second he resembles John the Baptist who claims to have prepared a path in the wilderness by which the messiah will come. Again, Clamence perverts Biblical passages for his own ends. If Christ died with irony on his lips, then Clamence lives with it. His goal, by no means, is to save mankind. Instead, he pronounces its fall.

Clamence's companion expresses a plan to return to Paris which Clamence greets with approval. He reminisces about wandering the streets there, traveling backward in his mind. Paris, though it may not be the gray, soggy hell Clamence sees in Amsterdam, is a city full of solitary men feigning eagerness to get home to their middle-class existences.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter 6 opens with the auditor visiting Clamence in his sick-bed. Here the narrator reveals that he suffers from Malaria, a chronic illness the symptoms of which flare up at intervals. He contracted the illness, Clamence explains mysteriously, during his time as pope. Obviously he does not mean the Pope who presides over the Roman Catholic Church. He delays, however, in revealing what duties his occupation as "pope" entailed and how he gained this title.

Clamence flashes back to a subway platform in Paris. Waiting for the train, he spies a large shaggy dog which he attempts to call to him. The dog hesitates in its approach, wagging his tail and appearing friendly, but maintaining some distance. Without compunction, however, the dog falls into step behind a young German soldier who walks briskly through the station. Resenting the fickle affection of the animal and the success of the German, it is at this moment that Clamence decides to join the French Resistance. Clamence is not sent to the front, however, and crosses into North Africa intending to wind up in London. Instead he follows a friend to Tunisia and there is taken hostage by the Germans. He is interned in a camp in Tripoli. There he meets a young Frenchman of the Catholic faith. Half-crazed, the young man expresses a furious hatred for the Roman Pope, who sits above his subjects and declares the need for a new spiritual leader - one found among miserable wretches such as themselves. This pope is to be elected not for his virtue, but for his failings. Clamence facetiously offers himself. When no one else volunteers, he is chosen. Acting as group leader of the cell, Clamence's most important duty is to manage water rations in the abominably hot, dry climate. This is no easy task, though, and Clamence admits himself not entirely up to it. He attempts fairness, judging and rewarding each man by his condition, but equality is not possible. Clamence finally defrocks himself by drinking the water allotment of a dying comrade.

Now, without preamble, Clamence asks his companion to check the bolt on the bedroom door and to open a small cupboard. Inside is the painting that had once hung behind the bar in the "Mexico City" introduced in Chapter 1. The painting, says Clamence, is the work of Jan van Eyck, a fifteenth century Dutch painter, called "The Just Judges." The original hangs in the cupboard and its rightful place in a museum is taken by a copy. Though Clamence did not himself steal the panel, he does not feel any crime has been committed in his retaining it.

Clamence is clearly ill, but persists in practicing his vocation of judge-penitent, continuing to lecture his companion even as his fever rages and breathing becomes strained. Again, he picks up the subject of slavery and again maintains its necessity. Everyone must choose a master, says Clamence. In order to counteract the freedom they have gained, all people turn to an absolute belief in sin whether religious or atheistic. They may want grace, but they have faith only in sin.

Given the hypocrisy of the world then, Clamence is called to be a judge-penitent, to embody the paradox that modern life requires. As the text draws to a close, Clamence summarizes for his companion the stages of the calculated argument he has just completed. First, he accuses himself, revealing all of his defects and shortcomings. From there he enlists the audience switching his indictment from himself to humanity in general: from "I" to "We." The listener's self-esteem therefore drops, and the judge-penitent can enjoy the distress he has wrought. Happiness, for Clamence, consists in making others unhappy. He indulges himself in everything - self-love, pride, boredom, any and all impulses - but, above all, his enjoyment is the suffering of others. In this way, he sets himself above his fellows and feels himself "adored." Everyone he meets becomes an accomplice in his malicious game.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 opens with the narrator in bed nursing a flare-up of Malaria that he contracted while in an African prison camp. However at first, Clamence does not say that he was a prisoner, but that he was pope. Seeing his companion's confusion, Clamence admits that it is often difficult to extract the reality of what he is saying from the mass of information - both true and false -that he delivers to his patient auditor. Admitting this, Clamence reveals something about his rhetorical technique that might not have been so clear up to this point. He admits to lying and to telling tales, but he presents these falsehoods as perfectly effective ways of reaching the truth. The stories and anecdotes he employs to make his point are similar to the parables Christ offers in the New Testament. Much of Clamence's personality continues to be an inversion of Biblical precedent, making *The Fall* a kind of new bible presenting the corruption of modern mankind.

Working his way to the story about how he became pope, Clamence begins by telling a seemingly inconsequential story. Waiting for a train in the Paris subway, he sees a stray dog. The dog is friendly enough but hesitant to respond to Clamence's call. However, when a young German soldier walks through the tunnel, the dog trots off at his side, causing Clamence immediate resentment. In its simplest form, the incident with the dog summarizes the narrator's insecurity about his personality. Like the people who dislike him from a distance, the dog refuses him in spite of its uncomplicated, animal brain. And as he so often does, Clamence reacts with disproportionate anger - being snubbed by a stray dog should not be compulsion enough to enlist in the military, but for Clamence it is.

Clamence is never sent to the frontlines. Instead, he is captured and interred in a camp near Tripoli. There he is elected "pope" by his fellow prisoners. Like the attrition that slowly kills modern man, the prisoners suffer more from hunger and thirst than from outright brutality. In this demoralizing environment, one of the captives, a young Catholic Frenchman, calls for a new pope - one drawn from the ranks of the wretched and destitute - to overcome the tyranny of the one in Rome. This young man, with his wild eyes and wasted body, appears as a prophet himself, installing Clamence as the head of a new Church, favoring him for his faults and not his virtues. Though Clamence

initially sees his new profession as comical, he soon begins to take it more seriously. The most important part of his job is water-rationing. Clamence does his best to be fair and gives each man what he needs, but factions begin to spring up within the camp. Clamence eventually loses his title for drinking the water of one of his dying fellows. What Clamence describes here recalls his earlier discussions of power. Even in an enclosed society like the prison camp, individuals choose sides against one another and each man takes care of what is his. It is survival of the fittest. Clamence drinks the water of a man who is already nearly dead, and thus ensures his own survival. Of course, if basic survival were the only issue to contend with, Clamence would be perfectly justified in what he did, but the human animal continues to be double, or perhaps hypocritical. Clamence is condemned for taking the water even though everyone in the camp must see the simple logic of his action.

Clamence tells his companion about the incident with the water without shame. He believed at the time that his presence was more important to the prisoners than was the presence of the dying and he continues to stand by that conviction. He goes further to say that the pope must be forgiven. By "pope" he seems to mean all religious and secular leaders. Only by forgiving them, he says, can one rise above them. This reflects back to his discussion of Christ in Chapter 5. Clamence seems to be suggesting that we forgive Christ, instead of using Him to gain forgiveness for ourselves. It is something of an odd sentiment, and Clamence trails of at this point as if he cannot fully reconcile his own argument.

Still lying ill in bed, the narrator tells his companion to open the cupboard on the other side of the room. In it is the painting that once hung behind the bar of the "Mexico City." It is called *The Just Judges* and is one of the panels from van Eyck's "Adoration of the Lamb." In the painting judges on horseback arrive to admire the animal which, of course, represents Christ. This panel, which is the original, has been replaced by a well-executed forgery, says Clamence. He adds ironically that he feels no guilt over this fact. Self-centered, destructive and a crook, Clamence hardly deserves a painting called *The Just Judges*. Furthermore, as a non-believer and a man who sets Christ on a level at or below the regular run of humankind, Clamence can only gaze cynically on the Lamb and what it represents. Still, Clamence pours out to his companion six reasons for why he feels no guilt in retaining the panel: (1) The painting is not his but belongs to the proprietor of the "Mexico City;" (2) The copy is indistinguishable from the original; (3) Possession of the painting gives him power - people line up to admire a fake while Clamence alone knows the truth of the painting's hiding place; (4) His theft might be found out and he will be sent to prison - which once and for all will reveal his corruption to the world; (5) The painting represents a purity that does not exist; and (6) The theft of the painting balances justice and innocence. All of these arguments boil down to one thing - Clamence is in control.

Finally Clamence reveals the essence of his philosophy: Everyone is guilty. Because everyone is guilty, everyone must be a slave to something. Democracy consists in making everyone equally enslaved. This slavery can issue from any authority - moral philosophy, political philosophy, or religion - though Clamence believes God is out of vogue. His job as judge-penitent, Clamence explains, consists fundamentally in

revealing this uncomfortable truth to the bourgeoisie who happen to wander into the "Mexico City." Clamence goes on to explain how he goes about achieving his goal. First he confesses his own guilt in detail. Then he transitions from speaking about himself to speaking about mankind more generally. But while his unsuspecting victims leave his tutelage feeling depressed and disheartened, Clamence remains content - he has come to terms with the duplicity of human life and even enjoys it. He gives into his every compulsion, and though he occasionally hears the phantom laugh, he finally feels himself adored by the scores of men he reduces to wretchedness. Clamence seems to have the ability to transfer his bitterness to others. Indeed, the more unpleasantness he spreads, the happier he becomes.

Clamence ends his narrative with the injunction: "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us" (147). Of course, even as he says that, he knows full well that, given a second chance, he would do just as he did the first time. Clamence maintains his dual personality to the end, knowing what he does is wrong, but feeling no remorse.

Characters

Jean-Baptiste Clamence (a pseudonym)

Narrator and sole speaker in *The Fall*, aged in his forties, middle class background. Clamence is a French ex-patriot who spends his time at a seedy bar in Amsterdam awaiting anyone who will listen to his tale of corruption and its concomitant philosophical musing. Using his considerable natural gifts, Clamence can charm anyone to his purposes, and with his tremendous self-love, has no compunction about doing so.

Immediately showing himself to be intelligent and shrewd, Clamence is perfectly at ease discussing modern bourgeois society, the Dutch as opposed to the European character, and waxes lyrical on the qualities and benefits of gin. He reveals a bit of himself as well, confessing a self-imposed ban on crossing bridges at night. His rhetorical method is clear by the conclusion of the first chapter - he intersperses long passages with peculiar bits of half-revealed information, thereby securing the attention of his auditor and carefully building the groundwork for his eventual conclusions and disclosures. Given the way in which the text is constructed, relying more on flight of ideas than on any physical movement, Clamence's eloquence is as revealing of his character as is anything he does. He is an egoist who relentlessly dominates a conversation, a calculating predator who dissembles as a matter of course, a masochist delighting in the slow torment of others and a power-monger who deftly avoids losing any control to his fellows. Naturally, it is not until the novel's final pages that these qualities become fully clear. As Clamence himself suggests, he has made a career of pulling unsuspecting victims down into his hell and he has become quite skillful at it.

Auditor

Nameless and silent, Clamence's companion - also a French ex-patriot and lawyer of approximately the same age and middle class background - stands in as a cipher for all of modern mankind with what the narrator sees as its weaknesses and defects.

Objects/Places

The Mexico City

The Amsterdam Bar in which Clamence and his compatriot first meet. It is Clamence's base of operations in his business of corruption - it is here that he makes contacts with his fellow Europeans and subsequently drags them down into hopelessness.

Paris

The city in which Clamence began his law practice, a city he compares to a painting that, in its realism, appears solid. During his time in Paris, Clamence descends from the respectable position of an advocate of the poor and desperate to maniacal self-degradation.

The Circles of e Hell

An invention of Dante in his *Inferno*. Each of the nine circles contained a particular kind of sinner - the Lustful in the Second Circle, for example, and the Gluttonous in the Third. The narrator compares the streets and the waterways of Amsterdam to Dante's vision of Hell.

Pont Royal

The bridge on which Clamence is present for the suicide of a young woman. After this incident, Clamence makes a vow never again to cross a bridge at night.

Pont des Arts

The bridge on which Clamence hears the phantom laughter that marks the beginning of his fall and the onset of his own self-awareness. He is to hear that laughter again throughout his life whenever he begins to doubt himself or when his tremendous ego is somehow challenged.

Greece

A country in which, Clamence points out, men can outwardly demonstrate affection for each other, holding hands as they walk through the streets and eschewing somewhat the female population. The narrator speaks of this with a kind of nostalgia though it is uncertain how completely his sentiments can be trusted.

Tripoli

Location of the prison camp in which Clamence is interred and in which he is elected "pope" by his fellow captives. In this role, Clamence reveals the full ruthlessness of his philosophy by drinking the water ration of a dying comrade in order to save his own life.

The Little-Ease

A torture device in which the captive is not given enough space either to sit or lie down and, thus, becomes horribly stiff and contorted in a very short amount of time. Clamence compares the life of modern man to imprisonment in the Little-Ease. The Spitting Cell

Another torture device named by Clamence in which the criminal is locked into a box from which only his head protrudes leaving him to be spat upon by passing guards. The narrator points out that humanity devised such a degrading punishment without the help of God.

"The Just Judges"

A painting by 15th century Dutch painter Jan VanEyck which hangs in a cupboard in Clamence's bedroom. It depicts ten horsemen on their way to venerate Christ in the form of the "Mystic Lamb." Though the painting is stolen, Clamence asserts that he has as much right to it as anyone else.

Social Concerns And Themes

The Fall, which has received mixed reviews from the time of its publication on, although it was hailed by Jean-Paul Sartre as the work that best reflects Camus's moral thinking, is a subtle confession. In the self-accusation of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, one finds the accusation of everyone, "the triumphant annunciation of man's total depravation," in the words of Germaine Bree. Camus satirizes the vices of an entire generation, and the basic guilt of humanity in every generation. Postwar men and women still suffered from the crimes of the early 1940s, and Holland is seen as a country of guilt for the Nazi massacres of the Jews. On the other hand, the question of universal guilt marks this work for some critics as a piece of religious writing.

Camus wrote The Fall when he was struggling with the question of Algerian independence. According to McCarthy, it marks Camus's artistic sterility and gloomy mood in the face of the possible separation of Algeria from France. Holland, with its absence of sun and its foggy atmosphere, can be seen as an anti-Algeria. The position taken by Camus in this conflict, which seemed at variance with his previous calls for freedom, is reflected in this melancholy satire.

Among the causes of guilt in this strange hero, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, is his refusal of responsibility. One night he had seen a woman on the Pont des Arts in need of help. She threw herself into the water, and he merely continued on his way. At the same time, he heard a mocking laugh behind him. The scene haunted him, and he tried in every way to assuage his guilt.

Her fall was symbolically his; he became aware of the presence of evil within himself. By accusing himself, he tries to escape the accusation of others.

His ruse, however, is not convincing, yet in this clever picture is a reflection of all people who are victims of the same self-deception.

Techniques

The Fall is a long monologue, a confession, a methodical introspection. In contrast to the informal style of The Stranger, the language is classically pure. Where The Stranger abounded in the informal passe compose, The Fall has conditionals and subjunctives. It is ironic and sarcastic throughout, yet with a tragic note in Clamence's inability to escape guilt and evil. P.H. Simon states that one can hardly "resist the charm of this narration, which is dry without baldness, rapid without excessive tension, illuminated with percussive formulas, in a tone of humor that is sometimes slightly grating but more often of a luminous and biting irony: the idea, scoured and polished, shines like a steel blade."

The Fall has been characterized more as a prose poem than a novel. Camus's only work not set in a Mediterranean climate, it is also characterized by the absence of time. As Germaine Bree observes, "day and night blend into eternal twilight." It moves in concentric circles, which reflect the circles in the Seine made by the falling body of the unknown woman. Religious symbolism abounds: the name Jean-Baptiste Clamence, which suggests an anti-John the Baptist crying out, not redemption, but guilt, in an arid and absurd desert; water, the symbol of regeneration as well as death; the Van Eyck painting, Mystery of the Lamb.

Clamence, like Meursault, is unable to accept redemption, but unlike Meursault who seeks for meaning in an absurd universe, Clamence seeks for forgiveness.

Themes

Power

"Power," says Jean-Baptiste Clamence, "settles everything" (Chapter 3, p.45). This single statement serves as a defense for everything from slavery to the demise of the dialogue as a manner of communication to the willing relinquishment of personal freedoms.

Clamence opens his discussion on power with the provocative notion that slavery is absolutely necessary to a functioning society. All of this aside, however, he insists that slavery not be boasted of. To remain in place, society must maintain a certain quiet understanding and decorum about the institution. Slaves are slaves because that is their nature - the only way in which they can be happy. The only response to this fact of life is to treat slaves according to their station and to expect reciprocal treatment from them.

Even dialogue has been reduced to a dynamic of master-and-slave. Clamence is the perfect example of this. He barely allows his companion to get a word in and, even when he does, he ignores the man's question and continues along on the subject he has already introduced. This selective deafness relates back to Clamence's earlier comment that if every argument were met with a counter-argument the back-and-forth could go on forever. Therefore, someone must accept the submissive role.

Every man is the master of someone or something, even if it is only his family or his dog. Likewise, every man is enslaved - Clamence even counts himself among this number. He admits that he is afraid of freedom, and, indeed, he is enslaved to his own ambitions as well as to the laughter in his head. Regardless of his ideas about himself, however, Clamence asserts that freedom is too heavy a responsibility for mankind, and thus mankind surrenders its freedom in the interest of peace of mind. God, according to Clamence, is largely absent from modern consciousness, but every individual locates his own master and so all of humankind lives under the rule of some higher authority. And that authority always offers the same options for enslaving oneself. Whatever system he chooses then, modern man, eschewing grace and believing only sin, is rendered a constant penitent, always shackled by the guilt of his wrongdoings.

When all is distilled to its essence, power is the thing that Clamence most craves. Whether it means dominating a conversation, making adoring slaves of his acquaintances, or possessing a priceless work of art, Clamence must at all times demonstrate his control and supremacy. That his need for domination is borne from a sense of his own deficiencies should, it seems, neutralize some of his effectiveness. But it is, perhaps, a measure of modern European society that he can prey on his fellows with so much success.

Politics

Well acquainted with the trials of poor and working class families, in the mid-1930s, Albert Camus became a subscriber to the tenets of Communism. He especially condemned the European bourgeoisie for compromising with the Nazis and the fascists and took that on as an equally persuasive reason for the adoption of socialism. This fact of Camus's political views resonates with the subtly disparaging comments Jean-Baptiste Clamence makes about the bourgeoisie in the opening pages of *The Fall*. Furthermore, given Camus's disgust with fascism, the narrator's praise for that political philosophy, which crops up now and again, is most certainly ironic.

Primitive vs. Sophisticated Culture

The Fall opens with the narrator explaining to his companion the nature of the proprietor of the Dutch bar in which they sit. The man is animalistic, near-mute and generally cut off from his immediate circumstances owing to his free-floating distrust. He presides over an establishment - peculiarly called the "Mexico City" - of an international, multi-lingual clientele. In other words, an environment has grown up around him in which he can never be entirely comfortable, despite his beast-like resignation.

Though it lacks a definite object, the bartender's distrust strings from a single source - his inability to understand any language than his own. Though he stands on his native soil, he is effectively in a kind of neutral zone where no one tongue takes precedence over the other and everyone suffers the same alienation. But, the narrator later argues, the Dutch lack the sophistication of the rest of Europe and so the bartender represents everyone who exists on the fringes of modern society.

At one point the narrator refers to the bartender as "Cro-Magnon man in the Tower of Babel." Cro-Magnon man, of course, is a pre-historical bi-pedal ancestor of modern humans, the remains of which were found in a cave in France, and The Tower of Babel is the tower in the Old Testament which was meant to reach all the way to Heaven. God, angered by the pride and ambition of the project, ruined the formerly uniform language of the builders, causing the construction of the Tower. The significance of calling the bartender "Cro-Magnon man in the Tower of Babel" is two-fold. First, by virtue of his "ape-like" status, the bartender seems to have been transplanted from an age even prior to the Biblical story. Secondly, fossil though he may be, the bartender exists in this post-Babel world. Twentieth century Western society therefore maintains a relationship with the past and its innocence. Indeed, even the narrator possesses a certain sympathy for the bartender's quandary, though he himself is no protector of innocence. Far from it, the narrator not only insists on the death of innocence but makes it his business to expose it for the fraud for the which it is.

Though compared to the duplicity and immorality by which he is surrounded, the bar's proprietor may seem incorruptible, the narrator presents him as neither admirable or enviable. In fact, the most generous thing the narrator says about the bartender is that he is similar to the lower primates, and therefore lives his life without ulterior motives.

This is a bit of foreshadowing on the part of Camus, as it will gradually become evident that the narrator neither does nor says anything *without* an ulterior motive. Furthermore, just as the anonymous bartender stands in for all that is backward looking and alien to modern society, the narrator represents all that is corrupt. By way of these two characters then, Camus presents humankind as having a dual nature. This notion of doubling will recur several times throughout *The Fall*, but this instance is the first.

The bartender reappears at the end of the novel, not in the flesh, but in conjunction with the painting *The Just Judges* - a panel stolen from van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece. This artwork used to hang behind the bar in the "Mexico City," but ends up locked in a cupboard in the narrator's bedroom. Though the narrator asserts that the bartender has as much right to the panel as the Archbishop of Ghent, he keeps it in his own custody. From its possession, he derives a sense of domination and power as well as a certain amount of danger. If the *Just Judges* is found, the narrator, who holds the physical painting, and not the bartender, who retains only a technical ownershipand a permanent shadow of the panel behind his bar, will go to prison. Because the painting is such an important symbol-carrying with it issues of innocence, censure, religion, and so forth - the fact that the narrator and the bartender share ownership makes them more then simply partners. In metaphysical terms, they are contrasting halves of a single whole.

As little as he is seen, the bartender's presence is keenly felt in studying *The Fall*. After all, he bookends the tale and acts as a necessary counter-point to the narrator. It is not by accident that the "Mexico City" is the narrator's main place of business or that *The Just Judges* so fully articulates his pre-occupations. Both the establishment and the artwork are the property of the bartender, illuminated by the words of the narrator. Primitive and sophisticated in *The Fall* are inseparable.

Religion

Given the title of the book as well as some very early references, it would seem that religion is not only not lacking in Camus' work, but is in fact a force to be contended with. And certainly the major themes of the tale - morals, ethics, judgment, punishment, and atonement - as well as the narrator's lofty evangelical tone, set the reader up for a discussion of religion, if not for full-on religious propaganda. Without too much trouble the narrator could turn his undirected passion to the church, any church. He could be a savior *posing* as a degenerate slumped in an Amsterdam bar awaiting lost souls. In truth, however, he is even more immoral than he at first appears and his purpose is not to rescue but to enslave. Still, *The Fall* addresses issues of Western culture on such a grand scale that to divorce them from the context of Western religion - more particularly, Christianity - would be near to impossible.

First there is the title of the book: *The Fall*. This "fall," of course, aligns itself with the Biblical fall of Adam and Eve, when in an instant humankind was reduced from joyful innocence to wisdom and wretchedness. It is clear from the first few pages of the novel that Camus' own "fall" is not anticipated or in process but already complete. The most

nearly incorrupt character in the room - the bartender - is not exactly innocent, but "ape-like." He is ill at ease in modern society and looks on everyone with mistrust.

The narrator introduces himself with a peculiar assumed name and an even more peculiar title, also assumed. He is, he says, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, judge-penitent. The resonance of his name is obvious. "Jean-Baptiste" is John the Baptist and "Clamence" is related to the French word for *clamor*. This first monikers sets the stage for the Biblical perversion and adaptation that will take place throughout the narrative. And the garrulous main character certainly creates a clamor of his own. "Judge-penitent," on the other hand, is not so obvious to deduce. The narrator, by the use of this phrase, equates himself with God - God the Father as Judge and Christ, as God the Son, the penitent.

The narrator goes on to test his companion's knowledge of the Bible. He calls the man a "Sadducee," expecting his bourgeois compatriot not to catch the reference. The Sadducees were a Jewish tribe known particularly for their great wealth and their refusal to believe in the resurrection of the flesh. They were once thought to have played a part in the Crucifixion of Jesus. Overly concerned with wealth, stingy in their aid to the poor, and too concentrated on the things of this earth to be bothered by things of the spirit, the Sadducees were the 1st century Hebrew equivalent of the 20th century Western European bourgeoisie. The narrator reveals three things with this reference. One, his personality - he uses what he believes to be an obscure reference in order to test his companion. Two, his knowledge - the narrator knows his Bible and, therefore, it must retain a position of some privilege in his philosophies, even if that privilege is simply to provide a direct counter-point to what he really believes. And thirdly, it proves the magnitude of the narrator's discussion with his companion. He has jumped straight from *The Mexico City* to Jerusalem, from the 1900s to the 1st century. Clamence clearly believes that religion - Christianity - possesses a special relevance to the values and ethics of the present time and place. Camus intensifies this relevance by giving both men some measure of Biblical understanding. One very significant religious reference is the narrator's frequent comparison of the canals of Amsterdam to the circles of Hell. Interestingly, however, this is a literary citation and not a Biblical one. Here Clamence again reveals the dual nature of the Western bourgeoisie. As in the reference to Sadducees - when both men understood the allusion, though holding no particular belief of their own - Dante's *Inferno* possesses the prestige of a sacred text while it is, in fact, secular. Religion and religious ideas provide modern men with a common currency, even as it has no more than a superficial value.

At one point in *The Fall*, the narrator and his companion sit in the damp and the fog of Amsterdam watching the heaving and twisting of a flock of doves overhead. These birds link the narrator even more clearly to his namesake John the Baptist. According to Matthew 3:16, during the baptism of Jesus by John, the Holy Spirit in the guise of a dove descends from Heaven to the head of the messiah. The birds in Amsterdam, however, must wheel around ceaselessly in the atmosphere as there is no holy head on which to descend. Indeed, in Matthew 3:7, John shouts curses at the Sadducees, who come to him for baptism, just as Clamence watches sardonically as his companion is offered no blessing.

As the narrator winds up his tale, he embarks upon an impassioned discussion of Christ and even some admiration, as well as a genuine humane compassion showing even through his thick cynicism. It is Christians Clamence objects to, not Christ. Christ, he says, submits willingly to his execution because He understands His all too human failings. Allowing himself to be elevated on the cross, Christ, puts Himself on a level with humanity, while professed Christians hoist themselves, using his mutilated body for purchase, in order to stand over and judge their fellows. In the generations following Christ's death, so-called believers have warped his message of meekness and charity and use it, as they use everything else, to their own advantage in their own self-centered game. And the narrator, both preparing the way and passing judgment, condemns humankind to this state of degradation.

Camus himself did not believe in God and criticized Christianity's tendency to focus on sin and punishment. Nevertheless, he retained a certain respect for the Church and looked on St. Augustine with fondness and sympathy. Echoing his author's ambivalence, Clamence, though he is a non-believer, is more than prepared to use both the rhetoric and the content of the Christian religion as vehicles for his own purpose.

Style

Point of View

The Fall is the story of Jean-Baptiste Clamence's life in Paris, prior to his moving to Amsterdam. Clamence tells his story in the first person to an anonymous companion. In fact, everyone but Clamence is anonymous in *The Fall.* The text reads like an unbroken monologue, moving from one subject to the next with Clamence the main character at all times. This format is indicative of Clamence's egotistical, narcissistic personality.

Setting

The Fall takes place against a few different backgrounds, each of which possesses its own distinct resonance. First, there is the Mexico City, a squalid bar in which Clamence awaits displaced Europeans, who he then leads through the ultimately demoralizing story of his life. Outside the bar is Amsterdam proper, the overall portrait of which is grim. Clamence compares the city's canals to the concentric circles of Dante's Inferno and, indeed, drawing from this description and the Biblical fall suggested by the book's style, Amsterdam is obviously meant to stand in as a Hell on earth, the place disillusioned Europeans go when they are looking for a new philosophy.

Amsterdam is not only Hell, however. Clamence later presents the fog and stagnant waters as the trappings of a contemporary prophet's desert. This interpretation depends on Clamence's assertion that he is the new Elijah. It also demonstrates what Clamence expects for the future of mankind. Calling out from the depths of Hell, without hope of a messiah, Clamence prophesizes only doom.

Clamence's story, however, is not confined to Amsterdam. Most of the action of the text takes place in Paris, a city he describes as a *trompe-l'oeil* - a painting intended to deceive the viewer into believing that it is a real object. In Paris, Clamence experiences the lowest points of his life and it is significant that he would set these unhappy times in what he describes as a semblance of a city and not a city itself. Clamence, despite everything, is unable to believe in his own failures and sees his disgraces through a layer of self-deception. His real life, as he sees it, is in Amsterdam, the place where he lies in wait for anyone who might be vulnerable to his malicious stratagem.

Language and Meaning

The Fall is the story of modern man's consciousness told from the extremely slanted point of view of one man. Not surprisingly then, the language of *The Fall* is distinctive for its irony and frequent paradox. The tale-teller himself - Jean-Baptiste Clamence - describes himself as a "judge-penitent" - a person who combines the authority of the judge to the submission of the penitent. During his law practice, he professes to have defended "noble murderers." This phenomenon reflects Clamence's own paradoxical

nature - an egotist with hidden doubts, an apparent philanthropist whose only real goal is self-aggrandizement.

Also, due to the personality of the narrator, the language of *The Fall* is unremittingly cynical. Clamence believes humanity to be lost, fallen without hope of recovery and he uses his tone as a means of breaking the resolve of his audience and bringing them to his way of thinking.

Structure

Using his own life as a model, Clamence illustrates for his audience the depravity of humankind. The accuracy of Clamence's life as a model is open to debate however. Self-serving ambition, narcissism, sensuality, hypocrisy, and ruthlessness are the character traits most powerful in Clamence. To accept him as indicative of human nature is to take a particularly negative and narrow view. But to accept him is, initially, what Clamence wants. He uses confession as a way of setting the groundwork that will support the guilt he turns on his audience. From accusing himself, Clamence gradually begins to shift blame to his companion, thereby achieving his aim of raising himself up by denigrating another.

Formally speaking, *The Fall* switches back and forth between the present time in Amsterdam and flashbacks to Paris. Each chapter represents one episode in Clamence's life, but though Clamence's narrative moves along smoothly from one chapter to the next, the structure of the text is not linear, it is more web-like. Incidents and ideas are interwoven throughout - subjects are introduced, set aside, picked up again, and explored. Whatever success Clamence might achieve is due, in great part, to his skill as a narrator. By keeping his audience off-balance, he is more able to sell his own philosophies.

Quotes

"A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers" (Chapter 1, p.6).

"Slavery? - certainly not, we are against it! That we should be forced to establish it at home or in our factories - well, that's natural; but boasting about it, that's the limit!" (Chapter 3, p.44).

"Power, on the other hand, settles everything" (Chapter 3, p.45).

"Taken by surprise, addressed from both sides, I had mixed everything up... In short, I had collapsed in public" (Chapter 3, p.53).

"But to be happy it is essential not to be too concerned with others" (Chapter 4, p.80).

"...compliments became more and more unbearable to me. It seemed to me that the falsehood increased with them so inordinately that never again could I put myself right" (Chapter 4, p.91).

"When all is said and done, that's really what I am...an empty prophet for shabby times" (Chapter 5, p.117).

"I pity without absolving, I understand without forgiving, and above all, I feel at last that I am being adored!" (Chapter 6, p.143.).

Adaptations

The only one of Camus's novels to have been adapted for the cinema is The Stranger, produced by Paramount in 1967 and directed by Luchino Visconti. Emmanuel Robles, a friend of Camus's, also shared in the screenplay, which was quite faithfu l to Camus's text. There is a short film, Albert Camus: A Self-Portrait , produced by Fred Orjain, which shows Camus talking about the theater, and which also gives some views of Algeria. There are a number of sound recordings of Camus's voice, where he reads selections from The Fall, The Plague, The Stranger, and Summer in French. The 1950 film Panic in the Streets, directed by Elia Kazan, although not directly inspired by Camus, treats the same theme of the plague as in Camus's The Plague.

Sister Irma M. Kashuba, S.S.J.

Topics for Discussion

What are "noble-murderers"? How does Clamence exploit such people for his own ends?

What is a judge-penitent?

How reliable a narrator is Clamence? Can his explanations of his own motives and feelings be believed?

How are Clamence's ideas about power reflected in his relationship to his companion?

Discuss how the young woman's suicide relates to the phantom laughter.

Discuss Clamence's ideas about friendship.

What role does classification play in *The Fall*? Why does Clamence at once resist and embrace classification?

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Literary Precedents

The Fall is situated in the pessimistic moral tradition of the great seventeenth-century classicists, La Bruyere and La Rochefoucauld. It also echoes Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground (1864), and its enigmatic hero who was unable to escape from himself, yet makes his confession to anyone who will listen.

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