# The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays Study Guide

## The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays by Albert Camus

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

The Myth of Sisyphus is a collection of essays written over the course of about twenty years that revolve around the subjects of freedom from ideology and meaning and living life to the fullest degree. The title essay, which makes up the majority of the collection, investigates these concepts in an abstract, philosophical manner, while the rest of the essays are illustrations of the principles contained in the first.

The first question in philosophy is whether or not one ought to kill himself. It is more important than any other question since it deals with an issue that is obviously more important than any other: the meaning of life. It is implicitly assumed that if there is no meaning to life, then one might as well commit suicide. Others try to escape the meaninglessness of life through religious hope. In any case, it seems that everyone who comes to the conclusion that the world is absurd—that is, that the world cannot be understood with human reason—does everything they can to try to escape that conclusion, as can be seen in the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Chestov and in the literary works of Dostoevsky and Kafka.

However, acknowledging the absurdity of the world does not entail suicide, nor is it necessary to try to escape it. In order to be philosophically honest, one must stick to the principles which served as the foundation for one's inquiry, and since the first and most obvious fact is that the world is absurd, that fact must never be abandoned. This means one must live a life which constantly revolts against the natural impulses to understand the world or to find meaning in it or a future world. Rather, life, absurd as it is, must be lived as it is in the present. This implies that the absurd man has a greater freedom than any other, because he is not bound by any religion or meaning in his life; he is free to do what he pleases, while others are slaves to their beliefs. The absurd man values above all else experience, and wants to experience as much as possible, so long as he remains conscious, in that experience, of the absurdity of existence, for in this way he perpetuates his revolt. Suicide, then, is ruled out, since death is the end of experience and therefore of his freedom.

The absurd man takes great joy in creation—as it is an extension and reliving of experience—and thus it is entirely possible to be an absurd artist. Unlike other artists, however, the absurd artist does not find meaning in his work, nor does he attempt to give it meaning. Rather, art for the absurd man is best when it simply portrays the absurdity of the world as it is. This also helps the artist remain conscious of that absurdity.

"The Summer in Algiers" and "The Minotaur" both provide illustrations of cities which, unconsciously, live according to this creed of absurdity. In both cases, the citizens do not enslave themselves to any conception of eternity or hope, but rather simply live for the present and the joys which it provides.

"Helen's Exile" is a commentary on the poor state of European society which has lost sight of beauty, in contrast to ancient Greek society which was able to always keep it in mind.

"Return to Tipasa" is an account of Camus' return to his hometown of Tipasa in which he rediscovers the natural innocence of his youth which was lost when he went to war. This innocence is characterized as a lack of any kind of moral system or philosophy, to which Camus believes Europe is now enslaved.

"The Artist and His Time" is an interview of Camus in which he describes the role of the artist as combining the purity of artistic creation with the need to inspire social and political changes.

# The Myth of Sisyphus: An Absurd Reasoning

## The Myth of Sisyphus: An Absurd Reasoning Summary and Analysis

The most important philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. All other philosophical questions come after an answer to this one, and this can be seen by the very actions of people. No one has ever died for some abstract metaphysical question, but many people give up their lives over philosophical questions about the very meaning of life, and, therefore, it is the most important subject. The question of the meaning of life is implicitly connected with the question of suicide, as it is often assumed that if life has no meaning, then it is not worth living.

Suicide has, to this point, only been treated as a social question, but this method is problematic, since suicide is an intimately individual act and has little relationship with society. What exactly happens in this individual act—the decision to end one's life—is difficult to say. It may be related to some large event in a person's life, but it may just as well have been triggered by some chance encounter. However, while the causes of suicide may be difficult to interpret, the meaning of the act is always the same: Life is not worth living any longer.

The fundamental feeling which causes men to want to commit suicide is not sadness or anger, but the feeling of absurdity, the perception that the world, and man's own existence, is meaningless and cannot be understood. Many philosophers have acknowledged this absurdity, but very few have committed suicide. However, this does not mean that the recognition of absurdity does not lead to suicide, as people find many reasons not to commit suicide. One way that philosophers escape absurdity is through religious hope in God. However, hope and suicide are not the only ways to respond to the world's absurdity.

In order to understand absurdity and whether it entails suicide, one must engage in a dispassionate, rigorous exercise of reason, something which is very difficult to do when life and death are involved. One must also approach this study in the correct way. It is, for example, difficult to observe the feeling of absurdity in others, as feelings are something intimately personal and are difficult to understand as an observer. At best, an observer can perceive certain consequences of the feeling which indicate something of the nature of the feeling itself; however, the true experience of the feeling can never be fully grasped. It is better to compare the perception of absurdity with the development of great ideas or works of art, which often arise from very mundane origins.

The perception of absurdity can result from simply reflecting on the pointlessness of one's daily work schedule or by sensing something incomprehensible in nature. Man naturally wants to try to understand the world according to his own human reason as all

thought is fundamentally human. However, man gets a glimpse of the absurd when he sees something of the "inhuman" in objects he contemplates. In other words, he sees the absurd when he realizes that there is something "dense" and impenetrable in nature, something which he can never understand.

Ultimately, only two things can be certainly known: That the self exists and that the world exists. Any attempt to understand the nature of either of these is fruitless and will fail eventually.

While systems based upon the notion of absurdity have existed in all times, modern philosophy seems to be particularly dominated by this notion. Martin Heidegger, for example, believed that the most basic fact of human existence was reason's inability to comprehend the world. Both Karl Jaspers and Leon Chestov argued that reason could not lead to the proof of any truth. Soren Kierkegaard embraced the absurdity and irrationality of the world. Husserl, while believing in truth, rejected the use of reason in obtaining it.

These philosophers are all instructive in examining the question of suicide, since the question of suicide is equivalent to the question of whether or not absurdity is something which must be escaped once it has been recognized. Before examining how these philosophers respond to absurdity, it is useful to analyze the term itself. In all of its uses, absurdity implies an incompatibility of lack of proportion between two things being compared. For example, if a very rich and beautiful woman marries a very poor and unattractive man, it may be called an "absurd marriage," since the bride and groom do not appear proportionate to one another.

Thus, in the sense used in this essay, absurdity means a lack of compatibility between human reason, which tries to unify and understand, and the world, which is fragmented and irrational. This relationship, or equilibrium, is the basis of "absurd reasoning"—reasoning which begins with the recognition of absurdity. This relationship implies that the absurd man should have three attitudes: a lack of hope, constant rejection of attempts to find truth, and perpetual dissatisfaction as a result of the denial of his innate urge to understand and unify the world.

Many existential philosophers, after admitting the absurdity of the world, attempt to escape it through a religious hope which does not logically follow from the foundation of absurdity. Jasper simply asserts this hope, without trying to justify it. Chestov founds this hope by elevating the irrational—which the rational mind cannot comprehend—and thus violating the absurd principle, which rests upon an equality between the rational and irrational. Kierkegaard takes Chestov's philosophy even further and turns the abandonment of human reason into a religious act itself, an ultimate sacrifice to God. Both of these philosophers begin by acknowledging the absurdity of the world and then immediately try to escape it, violating the assumption with which they started.

Husserl, who begins his philosophy by rejecting reason, seems to suggest a methodology which is very compatible with absurdity. He suggests that objects which are presented to the consciousness should be studied and analyzed simply as objects

in the consciousness, not as objective, concrete facts. Furthermore, each object in the consciousness is its own, independent event. This all would appear to cohere with the irrationality and fragmentary nature of the universe. However, Husserl breaks with absurdity by supposing that it is possible, through this contemplation, to extract some kind of universal essence from the objects and thus reach into their true reality. Thus, in a similar way to Plato, Husserl believes that man can attain real truth about the world, even if it is not through reason. The absurd man, however, aware that the world can never be understood, constantly rejects such urges to find truth.

At bottom, both the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Husserl try to reach conclusions which are desirable, not conclusions which are true. The real question for he who has recognized the absurd is how to live with it, not how to escape it. The desire to be comforted by religion or to find stability in solid, objective truth is somehow innate to man, but the absurd man rejects both of these as impossible. From this follows the third attitude: The absurd man lives with the constant dissatisfaction of never being consoled.

From these three attitudes, it follows that suicide is not an option for the absurd man, since suicide implicitly accepts that life must be meaningful in order to be lived. Rather, life, for the absurd man, is a perpetual revolt against the desire to explain and find meaning in the world and his only goal is continue this revolt as long as possible. Suicide, then, must be avoided since it willfully stops the revolt.

The absurd man is supremely free. The ordinary man may think he is free, but by believing that there is a meaning to his life he becomes a slave to that meaning. All of the choices he makes in his life are guided by that illusory meaning. Once he recognizes that there is no meaning to life or the world, however, he is freed from it, and the only obstacle to his continued freedom is death. Suicide, then, is an abandonment of man's freedom.

Since freedom is constrained only by the length of one's life, to live fully means to experience as much as possible. One is constantly offered a universe which is ultimately irrational and fragmentary, and it is through the experience of this world that the absurd man can exercise his freedom. In particular, he exercises his freedom by constantly denying that the world has any meaning or value. Therefore, to live fully, and exercise his freedom to the greatest extent, the absurd man above all values quantity of experience. He wants to experience the world as much as possible and is not at all concerned with what he experiences, since the absurd principle rules out the possibility of any kind of value-judgment. Quantity of experience is determined solely by the length of time one is alive and since experience is the absurd man's only joy, suicide is totally unacceptable, as it takes away that joy.

# The Myth of Sisyphus: The Absurd Man

## The Myth of Sisyphus: The Absurd Man Summary and Analysis

For the absurd man, life is lived without regard for the eternal. The value of one's life is contained entirely in one's lifetime. No ethical system binds the absurd man, but this does not mean that absurd man must live totally immorally. Rather, he may choose to live a life that others would consider upright or moral, since such virtue is an experience just like any other experience. Thus, there are many ways to live one's life, and no way of living is better than another, so long as one remains conscious of the absurdity of the world.

To live like Don Juan is one way of living an absurd life. For Don Juan, the basic motive for all actions is the satisfaction of every pleasure, especially the sexual pleasures. Love for Don Juan is not at all a transcendental or mystical entity, and from this it follows that he is able to love and be loved over and over. Love is very a much a temporal fleeting phenomenon, in light with the temporal emphasis of the absurd. Don Juan lives a life which is not sad, but filled with joy, since he accepts the limitations of his knowledge (he only knows that the world is absurd) and has no hope in the future. Rather, he lives only for the moment to satisfy his desires and his moral code is nothing more than this.

His lifestyle emphasizes quantity of experiences over quality of experiences by never pausing to ponder the significance of anything. Rather, he remains active, always moving on to the next experience. Don Juan is not necessarily selfish, since his love is different from the type of love fabricated in poetry and books. For Don Juan, love is an intrinsically time-bound experience and, as such, it is focuses entirely on the present and on the object itself, rather than away from it, as forms of love which believe themselves to be eternal often do. Many call for Don Juan's punishment claiming that his life is immoral or that he blasphemes God, but they really detest him because, by his acknowledgment of the absurd, he refutes everything that they believe about God or eternity.

Actors, while not always absurd men, live a lifestyle which might be considered absurd. By acting out many roles, they experience a great quantity. The actor emphasizes the temporal nature of absurdity. An actor's fame is very time-bound, as many actors are popular for only a few years and then are quickly forgotten. Further, almost no actors are famous after their deaths, while a writer or painter may be remembered centuries after his death. The actors product is also transitory; while a piece of literature can exist forever, an acting performance lasts for only a few hours.

Acting also illustrates symbolically that the universe is a combination of appearances. The actor, through make-up and costumes, represents a character, but there is no underlying reality. The absurd character of acting can also be seen in the choices made

by actors when the Church forbade theater. The actors, by choosing to continue their trade, were effectively choosing the present over eternity, a thoroughly absurd action.

The conqueror is another type of absurd man. He is a man who recognizes and embodies the triumph of the present over the eternity, as he is a man of action and not of contemplation. He wants to be intimately involved in the political events of his time because they are transitory and immediate. The conqueror also makes clear that political rights and freedoms are not the mystical gift of a God, but the very real consequence of military and political action and are, therefore, not from eternity, but from time. The conqueror's legacy is confined largely to his own lifetime, as his concern is with action and not with ideas. A conquered city may be reconquered years later, while ideas may persist for centuries.

All of these examples are simply illustrations of ways one might live absurdly and should not be taken to be normative examples to be followed, since the very notion of a normative example is ruled out by absurd principles. The examples given are particularly extreme ones, used to illustrate the way in which absurd principles can be played out in one's life. Any person, in any kind of life, can live absurdly; the only requirement is the constant awareness of the world's lack of meaning.

# The Myth of Sisyphus: Absurd Creation

## The Myth of Sisyphus: Absurd Creation Summary and Analysis

Art is the great joy for the absurd man, because it keeps him focused on the absurdity of the world and is a kind of tribute to the absurd world which he constantly confronts. Since he rejects any attempt to explain or understand the world, the absurd artistic creation becomes a matter of simply reliving and describing experience. Consistent with absurd principles, the absurd man does not think he is creating anything meaningful by producing art, nor does he particularly prize his work. Rather, creating art is simply a way of living out his absurd existence.

The goal of absurd art is to illustrate the principles of absurdity through the description of experience. Some forms of art lend themselves to this very well. For example, painting can very easily be a purely descriptive art form and there is little temptation to try to explain or understand the world that is depicted. Music is so focused on the individual's experience, as opposed to any kind of objective truth, that it, too, readily lends itself to being absurd.

Fiction writing, on the other hand, seems like it would present the temptation to explain and understand the world and therefore should be closely analyzed. Fiction writing, like any thought, involves the creation of a world with its own laws and truths. While philosophy or poetry also create worlds, fiction novel writing does this to the greatest intellectual degree, because it creates a world which is fuller and more complete than any other art. However, there is not a sharp distinction between fiction writing and philosophy, as the creation of any world involves, even unconsciously, the underpinnings of a philosophy. Expressing a philosophy through a work of fiction is actually an especially absurd action, since it uses images and concrete experiences rather than reasoned arguments, implicitly preferring conscious experience to reason. The danger in writing a novel—or in creating any piece of art—is in attempting to find or imbue meaning which does not exist, for such a path would lead one away to the foundational principles of absurdity.

The work of Dostoevsky is instructive in seeing how a novelist can begin with absurd principles but stray from them. Dostoevsky's work is permeated with the question of whether life has any meaning and whether there is a God. In "The Possessed," Kirilov, the main character, struggles with the tension between God's existence and freedom. He realizes that if God exists, he is not free, because God the creator of his actions; on the other hand, if God does not exist, he is himself totally free and, in a sense, he is god himself. Coming to this conclusion, he decides to commit suicide. However, his suicide is not inconsistent with absurd principles, as he commits it not to escape the absurd, but rather to illustrate the absurdity of the world to others. Dostoevsky, then, can be seen as thoroughly illustrating many absurd ideas.

However, Dostoevsky does not stay consistent to these principles as many of his other works conclude with the existence of God and hope in an afterlife. Ultimately, Dostoevsky falls prey to the same temptations as many others who perceive the absurd. While Dostoevsky is ultimately a failure as an absurd man, his life and work is still instructive in understanding absurdity, just as a religion can be understood best by discovering what it rejects.

To conclude, absurd art expresses the principles of absurdity—the meaninglessness of the world, lack of hope, and a dissatisfied life—but it does not do this through explicitly urging them on the viewer. Rather, the absurdity of the world is expressed through the experiences of the artist, who views them with the constant awareness of his inability to understand them. Art, then, serves also a way of constantly reminding the artist of the world's absurdity and keeping that awareness always present in his mind.

# The Myth of Sisyphus: Myth of Sisyphus

## The Myth of Sisyphus: Myth of Sisyphus Summary and Analysis

The life of the absurd man is symbolized in the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was a man who angered the gods by preferring earthly things to them and was sentenced to continually rolling a rock up a hill which could subsequently roll back to the bottom. He especially embodies the principles of absurdity by preferring things of this life to things of eternity and by living what is obviously a meaningless existence. When Sisyphus finally succeeds in getting the rock to the top of the hill and must watch it roll to the bottom, he reflects upon the absurdity of his life, much like the ordinary worker might one day reflect upon the absurdity of his own labor. Sisyphus is not unhappy, however, because he rejects slavery to the gods and carries out his labor with the zeal of the absurd man who wants nothing more than to simply experience.

# The Myth of Sisyphus: Appendix: Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka

## The Myth of Sisyphus: Appendix: Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka Summary and Analysis

Franz Kafka's works are intentionally written with an obscure meaning, forcing the reader to carefully read and reread the stories and thus bring out their inner significance. The stories at first seem like disconnected, bizarre series of events. In one book, for example, The Trial, the main character is put on trial, convicted, and executed, without ever knowing what crime he was being charged with and without ever seeming to care very much. This acceptance by the main character is a theme which permeates Kafka's work: What seems surreal and inexplicable to the reader seems perfectly natural to the characters. This lack of surprise parallels the absurd man's acceptance of the meaninglessness of the world; since all he experiences is absurd, one thing happening rather than another does not surprise him.

Kafka's works all operate on the principle of representing "supernatural anxiety" in completely natural, ordinary circumstances. Complex problems of the meaninglessness of life and the futility of existence are explored not through extreme examples which would be accessible to no one, but rather through the lives of a completely typical European, as in "The Trial," or in the life of a traveling salesman, as in "The Metamorphosis." Through this method, Kafka expresses what are fundamentally absurd notions: lack of hope in anything beyond this life, an unspoken revolt against the world, and the freedom exemplified by his character's acceptance of their often surreal fortunes.

"The Castle," Kafka's most important work, is thoroughly permeated by the recognition of the absurd. The main character, named simply K, comes to a village hoping to gain entrance to the Castle, which represents eternity and the divine. Every attempt he makes to become part of the Castle fails and he eventually settles on becoming part of the village and no longer being a stranger, which represents a resignation and acceptance of this world and a rejection of the Divine. However, K ultimately succumbs to hope, however futile, and thus departs from the path of the absurd man, by attempting to understand the castle by aligning himself with the Barnabas sisters, women who have been rejected by the Castle. By going to those scorned by the Castle, K hopes to understand the castle, much like one might try to understand God through the contemplation of those he punishes.

Thus, "The Castle" is a solution to the problem raised by "The Trial"—the absurdity of the world is ultimately answered with a call to hope. Kafka then falls into the tradition of existential writers, along with Kierkegaard and Chestov, of acknowledging the absurd at the outset, but then escaping from it in the end. However, Kafka's work is still valuable insofar as it provides a fruitful depiction of how man reacts to the absurd. Even if escape from the absurd is illegitimate, it is still true that the vast majority of men who recognize it hope to escape from it, and this is illustrated particularly well in "The Castle." The essence of absurd work is to show the gulf separating human reason from the inhuman and irrational world, and this Kafka achieves in his works, even if he ultimately turns away from the final conclusions of absurd thought.

# Summer in Algiers

## Summer in Algiers Summary and Analysis

Algiers is a city which offers beauty to those who love this life and who love the present, but is a source of grief for those who wish to escape their own humanity out of some hope in the eternal or God. The beach is the center of social organization in Algiers and it is where the young find themselves during any season of the year, but especially during the summer. In Algiers, unlike any other city in thousands of years, the residents are remarkably comfortable with nudity and it is not at all uncommon for young men and women to walk around the beaches totally nude. This represents an acknowledgment of one's desires which is so simple compared to the complicating codes of Christians and others who want to repress and hide the desires of the body.

Physically, the color of the Algerians' bodies symbolize the naturalness of their way of life. The spectrum of white and brown bodies blends in with the natural colors of the beach and surrounding landscape. Their life is natural because they do not make themselves slaves to any moral code or perceived meaning which guides their lives. Rather, they accept experience for what it is and are content with that. This simplicity is exemplified in their care-free willingness to dance throughout the night or the innocence of their marriage customs. The residents of Algiers do not obey any particular code of virtues, but nonetheless still have a certain set of basic rules that all follow—respecting one's mother, standing up for one's wife, and so on. There is nothing of substance, however, beyond that.

There is also a strange attitude towards death in Algiers. The residents are, for the most part, without religion and their attitude towards death appears to be without any kind of sacred reverence. This can be seen in the casual attitudes with which it is discussed and the little effort that is put into the monuments of the dead. There is a kind of respect paid to the dead, but their attitude is better characterized as fear, which is fitting for a society which emphasizes so much the joys of this life.

All told, the natives of Algiers illustrate life that recognizes the absurdity and meaninglessness of the world and who, therefore, live only for this life and do not deny themselves in hope of some future, illusory one. While their lives are not always ideal or perfect, the men and women of Algiers live without the restraints of a metaphysical system or moral code which enslaves this life to the fictions of another.

# The Minotaur

## The Minotaur Summary and Analysis

Men from time to time need to retreat to areas which are silent in order to collect their thoughts and better understand the world. This silence is best found in big cities, in which one can simultaneously be in the presence of others and yet be lost in the crowd. European cities, however, are too imbued with their violent and eventful histories to provide this silence. Cities can even be too filled with poetry to provide the proper silence for thought. The city of Oran, then, is ideal, as it is a kind of city without soul or poetry to distract the thinker.

Oran is a mixture of many surrounding cultures, having no distinctive culture of its own. It is a city built primarily around trade and as such is filled with all varieties of shops and trading houses. The culture among the youth is heavily influenced by American media. Young men try to imitate the leading men of American movies while young women try to imitate the elegant beauty of their counterparts.

Boredom is a great risk in Oran, as there is little intellectual life or high culture, and many of the residents have simply accepted this. This boredom is the result of the drab landscape which is dominated by stones and the gray "mineral sky" which looms above the head all day; the residents of Oran have even constructed walls to block out a view of the sea. All of these features lead to a kind of mental nothingness, in which the mind is not tempted to think about anything at all and as a result focuses on man himself.

The people of Oran entertain themselves with entirely fleeting, temporal pleasures, such as watching boxing matches. Force and violence are, by their nature, temporary pleasures whose effects do not generally beyond a very short time-frame and they are therefore perfectly suited for Oran, who has no aspirations of reaching into eternity for something meaningful. Rather, the Oranese are perfectly content to enjoy the sight of two men mercilessly beating one another.

Oran contains many objects which could be called monuments of the city, some of which have been donated by other cities and seem too civilized and out of place in a city that is remarkably uncivilized. Other monuments candidly celebrate the heritage of Oran by remembering its colonial heritage. One particular monument that stands out, however, are the two statues of lions that adorn the city hall. They are not particularly well-crafted statues, but their presence and obvious unimportance continually bring the mind back to thinking of nothing, since they suggest very little else.

The Oranese are also constantly engaged in the process of extending their coast further into the see by blasting rocks out of the nearby cliffs and putting them in the water. This task is ultimately futile, as over the course of a few decades, the rocks will be eroded or otherwise carried away and the work will have to be done again, but it is a particularly

fitting type of labor for Oran, since, like the city itself, it lacks any real meaning or purpose.

The landscape surrounding Oran is suggestive of innocence. While many of the areas directly by the city show the marks of human society, one need to travel far to find beaches which show no sign of civilization or human interference and display only their ancient, timeless character. This innocence is symbolic of Oran's own innocence—its freedom from the lofty ideas and pretentious philosophies which plague the cultures of so many European cities. Rather, it accepts the meaninglessness of the world and, to an extent, embraces it.

# Helen's Exile

## Helen's Exile Summary and Analysis

Modern European culture has lots it appreciation for beauty and can look to ancient Greece as an example to imitate in order to reclaim that beauty. The Greeks differed from modern Europeans first of all in their values: For the modern European, value is understood as an object which is gradually revealed in the progress of history, whereas the Greeks understood value as the necessary prerequisite to any action. Second, the Greeks were humble enough to admit the things which they did not know, whereas modern Europe claims to have a total mastery of knowledge. As a result, Europe has preferred mindless conflict to reasoned debate—for if Germany or France already knows everything, there is no reason to debate with the other.

# Return to Tipasa

## Return to Tipasa Summary and Analysis

Camus recounts a trip he made back to his hometown, Tipasa, which he has only visited once since the end of his youth—marked by his departure for war in Europe during World War II. For Camus, Tipasa represents his lost innocence which existed prior to any moral code or complex philosophy, which innocence was lost definitively during the war. He returned once to Tipasa, immediately after the war, but was unable to rediscover what he had lost. After fifteen years and much contemplation, he realized the value of what he had lost. By losing that keen perception of beauty that he had enjoyed while a young man in Tipasa, he also lost the ability to effectively fight for justice, since beauty and justice, while not the same, are mutually dependent upon one another. When he finally returns at the age of forty, he is able to find once more that beauty he lost and glimpse the innocence which was ripped away by war. His experience is, in a way, a metaphor for Europe's loss of innocence and a call for it to throw away the philosophies which emphasize only justice and forget beauty.

# The Artist and His Time

## The Artist and His Time Summary and Analysis

In this interview, Camus explains the role of the artist in the modern role. The artist's role is not primarily to be a "witness" against modern forms of oppression or injustice. Rather, the artists role is the same as always: to create. However, the artist, as a man, has an obligation to give voices to those who are the victims of this oppression and justice and, as a result, to reflect that in his art. It is not necessary to do this in the form of direct essays which call for this or that specific political change. Rather, it is better to serve this cause through simply portraying individual lives in the clearest light possible. In this way, the artist strikes a balance between calling for social change and remaining faithful to his vocation of being, first of all, an artist.

Camus also separates himself from the Marxists of the current day by rejecting what he considers to be their unrealistic view of history. The Marxists believe that human nature will one day be finally realized once socialism has finally been achieved, a theory of history which Camus compares to the Christian belief in a Second Coming. While the Marxists consider themselves to be realists, he finds their views to be ultimately thoroughly unrealistic. Many of the socialists of his day, too, have been assimilated, in some part, by the mechanisms of the modern state and therefore compromise the principles which define the Left—opposition to war and sympathy for the poor and oppressed—in favor of "practical" concerns of the modern state.

# Characters

## Søren Kierkegaard

Soren Kierkegaard is an existentialist philosopher who Camus claims begins with the perception that the world is absurd but ultimately escapes from that conclusion through religious hope. Kierkegaard believes in the inability of reason to understand the world—which is the fundamental claim of Camus' absurd reasoning—and comes to the inevitable conclusion, then, that true knowledge is impossible. However, he is uncomfortable with this claim and, as a result, characterizes man's rejection of reason as a kind of ultimate sacrifice to God. God's existence cannot be proven—since reason is flawed and useless—and therefore one abandons reason to God and irrationally has faith in him anyway: this is the famous "leap of faith." For Camus, however, this "leap of faith" is a betrayal of the principles which Kierkegaard begins his philosophy with and, therefore, is totally illegitimate. More than any other philosopher, Kierkegaard embodies what Camus sees as a natural human "nostalgia"—a desire to find comfort in a world that is meaningless and absurd. The truly absurd man must, however, live without the consolation of hope or religion.

## Franz Kafka

Franz Kafka is a German short story and novel writer whose work is characterized by the surreal and inexplicable events which happen in them. According to Camus, Kafka's works are intentionally written in a manner which obscures their meaning in order to force the reader to read them over several times. The characteristic of Kafka's work Camus finds most interesting is what he describes as "naturalness."

While the events that happen in Kafka's stories are never natural—in one story, the main character slowly turns into an insect, for example—the most shocking fact about them is that the characters never appear to surprised by the strange events. The man turning into an insect, for example, is only worried because he is afraid he will be late to work. This style of depiction is very much in line with the "absurdity" of Camus' philosophy—the absurd man sees no meaning or order in the world, and as such is not surprised by any series of events.

Despite the strong representation of absurd principles in Kafka's work, however, he ultimately fails to carry out those principles to their conclusion. While "The Trial" does a good job of portraying the meaninglessness of the world, the later "The Castle" responds to this meaninglessness by ultimately surrendering to the desire to hope and find God. Nonetheless, even if Kafka's work represent an imperfect illustration of absurdity, they do insightfully characterize the natural response of man to perceiving the absurd: a vigorous desire to escape from it.

## Fyodor Dostoevsky

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a 19th century Russian novelist and short story writer whose work embodies many of the questions which Camus investigates in "The Myth of Sisyphus." Dostoevsky's works constantly inquire into the meaning of life and the existence of God and, therefore, start from the some basis as Camus' philosophy. This absurd philosophy is contained especially in his novel "The Possessed." However, Dostoevsky ultimately departs from the absurd principles with which he seems to begin as he ultimately concludes that God exists and that meaning and hope can be found in him. Despite these shortcomings, Camus sees Dostoevsky as a model for the absurd writer.

## Leon Chestov

Leon Chestov is a a Russian philosopher who comes to the conclusion that the world cannot be known or understood and that man's reason is ineffective. Thus faced with a world which is without meaning or order, Chestov escapes from it by identifying this meaningless void with an equally unknowable God who can, nonetheless, be believed in and served.

## Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is a German philosopher who wrote during the last half of the 20th century. Of all the philosophers which Camus analyzes, Nietzsche appears to be the one he admires and agrees with the most. Nietzsche recognized the absurdity of the world and, unlike many other philosophers, made no attempt to escape from it. Quotations from Nietzsche are used throughout the collection to illustrate Camus' points.

## Edmund Husserl

Edmund Husserl is a German philosopher who developed a philosophical system known as phenomenology. In line with Camus' absurd philosophy, Husserl believed in the uselessness of reason. Instead, he confined all thought simply to the study of objects as they were experienced. In this way, too, Husserl agrees with Camus, who put the greatest importance on experience. Husserl ultimately departs from absurd principles, however, by claiming that the study of experience can lead to the revelation of universal essences of objects—a kind of core of reality that reveals their inner truth. For Camus, such inner truth is totally impossible.

## Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger is a German existentialist philosopher who identifies the chief driving force behind mankind as a kind of supernatural "anxiety"—a lack of certainty about the

nature of the world which ultimately stems from its mystery and impossibility to completely comprehend. Without explaining how, Camus states that Heidegger, like Husserl and Kierkegaard, ultimately departs from the absurd principles with which he begins.

## Marxists

Marxists are political and social activists who desire the abolition of capitalist society and its replacement with a social organization which empowers the working class. In Camus' time, they were very active in political affairs. Despite his leanings towards the Left, however, Camus is very critical of the Marxists. He believes that their view of history—which is a kind of inevitable, gradual unfolding of socialism—is unrealistic and idealistic and that many today have compromised their basic principles.

## Sisyphus

Sisyphus is a character from Greek mythology who Camus believes represents the absurd man. Sisyphus rejected the gods in favor of earthly goods and his punishment was to continually roll a rock up a hill, after which it would roll back down the bottom. Sisyphus is an absurd man because he rejects the eternal and divine in favor of the present and earthly and because his existence is obviously meaningless—nothing could be more clearly without meaning than pointlessly pushing a rock up a hill for eternity. However, despite this punishment, Camus sees Sisyphus as ultimately free and happy, because he rejects any attempt to find meaning in his life and is content simply with experiencing.

## Kirilov

Kirilov is a character from Dostoevsky's "The Possessed" who embodies many of Camus' absurd principles. He rejects the existence of God and reasons that, if God does not exist, then he is totally free, since there is no God which is the cause of his destiny. Kirilov decides to commit suicide, but his decision is not totally out of line with absurd principles, since the reason is not to escape the meaninglessness of life—which, for Kirilov and Camus, is a good thing—but rather to be an example to others and show them true freedom.

# Objects/Places

## Absurdity

Absurdity, in general, is a lack of proportion or similarity between two things being compared. For example, a couple might be considered absurd if one partner is much more attractive than the other. In the case of Camus' logic, absurdity is equivalent to the meaninglessness and incomprehensibility of the world: Man's reason naturally wants to try to understand the world according to human terms, but the world is ultimately irrational and inhuman and, as such, cannot be explained or given any meaning.

## Suicide

The question of whether or not one should commit suicide is, according to Camus, the first question that philosophy should answer. Ultimately, after acknowledging the absurdity of the world, Camus rejects the legitimacy of suicide, claiming that it is an abandonment of the philosophical truths he began with. The absurd man finds joy in simply experiencing. Death is the end of experience and, therefore, suicide is contrary to the principles the absurd man begins with.

## Hope

Hope, according to Camus' philosophy, is a dishonest escape from the reality of the absurd. Confronted with the fact that world is meaningless and cannot be understood, it is natural for a person to attempt to find meaning by placing their hope in a future life.

## Nostalgia

Nostalgia is the natural desire in man to find meaning and truth in the world. The term is used as a catch-all for all of the temptations that drive one who was realized the absurdity of the world away from that conclusion. Nostalgia is the reason for the failure of existentialist philosophers.

## Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical school which agrees in many ways with Camus' absurd philosophy (for example, about the meaninglessness of the world) but ultimately deviates by placing hope in religion or God.

## Algiers

Algiers is a North African city which is the subject "Summer in Algiers." Like Oran, Algiers displays many of the attitudes that are implied by absurd philosophy. In Algiers, Camus finds delight in watching the carefree attitude of the young towards life and remarks how natural and innocent their behavior is, contrasted with the enslaved and unnatural way of life of many European cities.

## Oran

Oran is the North African city that is the subject of "The Minotaur." Oran represents a city which unconsciously lives out absurd principles. Unlike European cities, it is not enslaved by any kind of religious or moral ideology and the residents simply live this life without preoccupation about what comes after death. Camus notes that there is a certain "boredom" which permeates the city and which he finds useful in clearing the mind and focusing it on man.

## Tipasa

Tipasa is Camus' hometown in Northern Africa, a small city that is located near Algiers. Tipasa represents the natural freedom and innocence with which Camus characterizes his youth, which innocence was lost during World War II. In returning to Tipasa twenty years later, Camus regained that innocence and was able to view the world correctly again.

## Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece, in contrast with modern Europe, was able to keep a proper perspective on virtue and beauty, things which modern Europe in its philosophical emptiness has lost. Camus suggest ancient Greece as a model of what modern European nations should become.

# Themes

## Absurdity

The chief theme of the entire collection of essays is that the world has no meaning and cannot be understood. Human reason naturally wants to try to understand things in human terms and find a unity in the world. Many attempts have been made to do this, but all such attempts ultimately fall apart. This is because, unlike human reason, the world is fragmentary and distinctively inhuman. As a result, reality can never truly be penetrated and any truth—other than that truth is impossible—can never be attained. Absurdity it should be noted is not a feature of the world itself, but rather the relationship between the mind and the world. Absurdity, in general, is a lack of proportion between two things. Therefore, absurdity is the lack of proportion between the unifying human mind and the non-unified and irrational world.

According to the philosophy of the absurd, the world's absurdity must be kept in mind at all times and one must carefully guard against any temptation to violate that basic truth. The difficulty with many forms of existential philosophy is that they set out with absurd principles but illogically wind up rejecting them in favor of hope in God. The absurd man is who he succeeds in fighting off these desires and stays true, until the very end, to the absurd principles he accepted at the start.

## Living Life to the Maximal Degree

"The Myth of Sisyphus" begins by asking the question: Should one commit suicide? The question presents itself on the background of the meaninglessness of life. It would seem that if one concludes that life is without meaning that life is also not worth living and, therefore, that suicide is the only logical choice. Camus, however, maintains that life is meaningless but rejects that suicide follows logically from it. Rather, he argues, the man who was accepted the absurdity of existence takes great joy in the experiences that this life gives to him. The absurd principles lead one to a perpetual revolt against any attempt to understand or give meaning to it, and that revolt is continued in every experience one has. Therefore, far from suggesting suicide, the absurd man avoids death by any means, since death means the end of his existence and therefore also the end of his experience and revolt. Furthermore, the absurd man wants to live this life to the maximal degree, and though this can take a variety of forms, it always means that the consciousness of the world's absurdity is always foremost in his mind. Camus sees this joy of life exemplified particularly in the lifestyles of the citizens of Algiers and Oran.

## The Absurd Man as Creator and Artist

Since the absurd man takes great joy in experience, it is only natural the absurd man would be especially drawn to creation as an artist. However, absurd art differs greatly from other types of art. It is obvious that an absurd artist would not attempt to imbue his

works with any kind of meaning, or find any meaning in them, since it is foundational belief that there is no meaning in anything. Rather, the absurd artist simply recreates his experiences or creates entirely new experiences through his art. His method of portrayal is to "shed as much light as possible" upon the subject and show its inner inhumanity—show how the nature of the object defies any attempt to be understood by human reason. This serves two purposes. First of all, it is pedagogical: It teaches the viewers of the art about the absurdity of human experience and the world. Second, it allows the artist to constantly stay conscious of the absurdity of the world and the meaninglessness of his experiences. Despite how fit the absurd man is to create art, however, he does not particularly prize his art; the creation of art is simply an experience like any other and takes on no particular importance in his life.

Art can also serve social purposes, as Camus explains in "The Artist and His Time." While the goal of art remains the same—to shed light on everyday experience—it can combine with the purpose of giving a voice to the poor and oppressed and thereby improve their lot in life.

# Style

## Perspective

Camus is a Nobel-prize winning writer with a strong background in journalism and a consistent record of social activism. Despite his focus on literature and social causes, however, he is also very familiar with philosophy, especially the development of philosophy through the late-19th and early-20th centuries. As "The Artist and His Time" indicates, Camus is a strong advocate for social and political change in Europe and describes himself as Left-leaning politically, citing particularly his concern for the poor and his opposition to war.

Camus is also an explicit enemy of religion and believes that all forms of religion or belief in God or gods lead to the enslavement of man and unhappiness on earth. This is obvious in his critique of Christian or otherwise theistic philosophers in "The Myth of Sisyphus" and his praise of the down-to-earth lifestyles described in "Summer in Algiers" and "The Minotaur." In this regard, he plants himself firmly in the philosophical tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose influence can be seen both explicitly and implicitly throughout the collection of essays.

## Tone

In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus assumes an argumentative tone that makes it clear he is attempting to argue for a specific point of view. He is very critical of almost all of the philosophers he discusses (with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche) and makes little attempt to qualify or restrict his statements. In the case of Kierkegaard, for example, he makes it explicit how wrong he thinks Kierkegaard is to move from the irrationality of the world to the existence. He even goes so far as to impute this to dishonesty in Kierkegaard; Kierkegaard's beliefs are based more on desire and less on logic and reasoning, he says. His attitude towards Franz Kafka is a bit more charitable, even though he ultimately finds disagreement with him as well. It would seem that Kafka is something a literary model for Camus, and this might explain his gentler approach to his work.

Camus' tone in other essays varies. In "Summer in Algiers," "The Minotaur," and "Return to Tipasa" his literary style is very descriptive with only brief moments of analysis. In these he is trying to paint a picture rather than prove a philosophical point. In "Helen's Exile" and "The Artist and His Time," Camus' tone is much more direct as he is obviously trying to prove specific points. These essays differ somewhat from "The Myth of Sisyphus," however, in that his concerns are political and social, primarily, rather than philosophical.

## Structure

"The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays" is, as the name suggest, a collection of essays. The title essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus," comprises the majority of the collection. It is divided into four chapters and an appendix. The first chapter takes about half of the essay and comprises the entire philosophical discussion. It begins by asking the question of whether or not one should commit suicide. From there, Camus introduces the notion of the absurd and evaluates the history of recent philosophy in light of it, coming up with an entirely negative judgment. He then looks into the consequences of absurd philosophy. In the second chapter, "The Absurd Man," Camus gives several illustrations of how one might live an absurd life, though none of the examples is suggested as normative. In "Absurd Creation," Camus considers artistic creation in light of absurd principles and concludes that art is especially connected with living an absurd life. The final chapter is simply called "The Myth of Sisyphus" and is a brief account of the Greek myth of Sisyphus which is reinterpreted in the light of Camus' philosophy. In the appendix, Camus analyzes Kafka's work and determines to what extent it is absurd.

The remainder of the book consists of five relatively short essays. "Summer in Algiers" and "The Minotaur" are picturesque illustrations of life in two cities which he perceives as living in particularly absurd manners. "Helen's Exile" is a social and political commentary in which he chides modern Europe for its abandonment of the concept of beauty and suggests ancient Greece as a model society. "Return to Tipasa" is a memoir of his return to the town he grew up in which symbolizes his reacquisition of his childhood innocence. "The Artist and His Time" is an interview in which Camus explains his opinion about the social role of the artist.

# Quotes

"There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide." (p. 3)

"A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger." (p. 6)

"All great deeds and all great thoughts have a ridiculous beginning." (p. 12)

"This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said." (p. 21)

"The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together." (p. 21)

"And carrying this absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and conscious dissatisfaction (which must be compared to immature unrest)." (p. 31)

"From the abstract god of Husserl to the dazzling god of Kierkegaard the distance is not so great. Reason and the irrational matter but little; the will to arrive suffices." (p. 47)

"This absurd, godless world is, then, peopled with men who think clearly and have ceased to hope." (p. 92)

"To think is first of all to create a world (or to limit one's own world, which comes to the same thing)." (p. 99)

"Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (p. 123)

"At the hour when the sun overflows from every corner of the sky at once, the orange canoe loaded with brown bodies brings us home in a mad race. And when, having suddenly interrupted the cadenced beat of the double paddle's bright-colored wings, we glide slowly in the calm water of the inner harbor, how can I fail to feel that I am piloting through the smooth waters a savage cargo of gods in whom I recognize my brothers?" (p. 145)

"In order to flee poetry and yet recapture the peace of stones, other deserts are needed, other spots without soul and without reprieve. Oran is one of these." (p. 159)

"It seems that the people of Oran are like that friend of Flaubert who, on the point of death, casting a last glance at this irreplaceable earth, exclaimed: 'Close the window;

it's too beautiful.' They have closed the window, they have walled themselves in, they have cast out the landscape." (p. 178)

"But, after all, nothing is true that forces one to exclude. Isolated beauty ends up simpering; solitary justice ends up oppressing. Whoever aims to serve one exclusive of the other serves no one, not even himself, and eventually serves injustice twice." (p. 198)

"Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future." (p. 212)

# Topics for Discussion

What reason does Camus have for thinking that whether or not to commit suicide is the first and most important philosophical question?

Why does Camus think that suicide does not logically follow from the meaninglessness of life?

Camus accuses other philosophers of believing what they desire, not what is logical. Is there any area in which Camus might be charged with the same accusation?

What is the difference between an absurd philosopher and an existential philosopher?

In what way is the absurd man freer than anyone else?

According to Camus, if one is an absurd man, is there a better or worse way of living that life? Why or why not?

How do Algiers and Oran represent the ideals of Camus' absurd philosophy?

What exactly does Camus mean when he says that Oran instills a kind of "boredom" in those who reside there? Why does he consider this a good thing?

How does Camus' obvious concern for political and social issues fit in with his philosophical system. Is it possible to advocate a certain form of political organization without morality or meaning in life?