

THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This critical analysis on 'The Myth of Sisyphus' correlates fate of a modern man with the fate of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is the symbol of mankind. The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd than that of Sisyphus. Like Sisyphus, a man makes his own fate, his own choices and controls his own fate. This article analyses the modern human fate and relates it with that of Sisyphus on the ground of Camus's 'The Myth of Sisyphus'.

KEYWORDS: Myth, Sisyphus, Absurd, Fate, Consciousness, Symbol & Descent

The Author and His Works

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was born in Algeria and Educated at the University of Algiers. After Algeria gained independence. Camus took French citizenship. Physically, he remained unhealthy all the time in his life. Because of the regular attacks of tuberculosis, he was prevented from the service of the French army in the Second World War and also from the lectureship of philosophy. He tried different jobs- actor, school teacher, a playwright- and finally he found himself successful in journalism. He had lost his poor father in the First World War. The World War I, was itself destructive and absurd, and the World War II followed it with similar and repetitive destruction and absurdity. This absurdity is most unusual theme of his literary works. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. He died in a car crash at the age of forty-six.

Camus started his successful life as a journalist. He worked as co-editor of the left-wing newspaper *Combat*, the French Resistance underground paper, until 1948. During this time he started a philosophical fiction and commentary. He earned the worldwide reputation of his first novel *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*) (1942). The novel has a theme of absurdity - about an absurd man in an absurd world. The man lives in a moral wilderness. Life is seen meaningless anyway in the universe. *The Plague* (1947) describes the man's isolation in the world. *The Rebel* (1951) is an essay on political disagreement. His other works are *The Fall* (1951), *Caligula* (1945), *State of Siege* (1948), *The Just Assassins* (1950), and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).

INTRODUCTION

The Myth of Sisyphus is a philosophical essay on suicide and the absurd. Camus viewed life meaningless because of the repetitive wars, lack of faith in authority, regular attacks on religion, and the depression of the worldwide economy. He was looking into the causes of suicide. He was meditating to find out some positive meaning of life. He concludes a man makes himself his own fate. As happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth, he can't avoid the absurd. Pleasures of life lie in absurdity and so it is vice versa, too. The ancient myth of Sisyphus is an allegory to elude the truth that, a man does repetitive and meaningless work in this meaningless world. A modern working man's destiny is similar to the destiny of Sisyphus. Sisyphus loved his life and for that he ignored the gods' command. After death, he was ordered to

stay in Hades, the Underworld. Having permission from God to punish his wife, he came back to the earth. However, he liked all the beautiful landscapes of the earth and didn't return. As a result, he was punished for his rebellion against the gods. He was given the task of pushing a rock up a mountain. When he reached the top, the rock rolled down again. He had to push it back up the mountain. Though futile work, it lasted forever, as an eternal punishment.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Myth of Sisyphus

The ancient Greek poet Homer portrays Sisyphus as the wisest and most prudent of mortals. This portrait clarifies that Sisyphus was a mortal. Among the mortals, he was so wisest and most prudent that he could defy the powers of gods, too. Camus alludes to another tradition that supposes him to be disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. It is a myth. A myth is always paradoxical. It is a dogma. That's why, opinions differ about mythic events and characters.

One of many reasons why Sisyphus became the futile laborer of the Underworld has been reported that he was accused of a certain *levity* in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. Aegina, the daughter of Aesopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. Sisyphus offered to tell about it on condition that Aesopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. He gave the information. He liked to have water as a benefit of his knowledge of the abduction. He challenged the celestial thunderbolts of Jupiter (Jupiter, known as the god of thunderbolts). For this crime of stealing the secret, he was punished in the Underworld.

Homer's opinion is that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. He disturbed the order of the creation. The Underworld remained deserted and silent. Pluto, God of the Underworld, could not endure the sight. He sent the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her (Death's) conqueror. He was punished for this cause in the Underworld.

Third opinion has been given from the mythology. When Sisyphus was near to death, he wanted to punish his wife. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. He woke up in the Underworld. He could not live under the strict obedience of the dark place. There was no love anywhere which could entertain him. He obtained permission from Pluto, God of the Underworld, to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. He came back to the earth, but instead of getting work done, he enjoyed his life among the beauties of the earth. Sea, water, sun, stones, landscapes and other beauties of the earth kept him so spellbound that he didn't wish to return to the Underworld. From there recalls, signs of anger, warnings were sent of his departure from the earth to the Underworld, but he ignored. Gods had difficulty to maintaining the order of the world. The order of the gods was necessary. Pluto sent his messenger Mercury- who seized Sisyphus by the collar and snatched all of his pleasures. He was driven back to the underworld. Gods were annoyed and decided to punish him severely. Sisyphus was asked to push a stone up to a mountain top from where that had to fall again rolling down to the plain ground. The gods decided this punishment by thinking a reason that "there is no more dreadful punishment than the futile and hopeless labor."

In all the stories above concerning with Sisyphus have a common thing that he denied the power of the gods. He had challenged the authority of the gods and ignored all the commands. Therefore, he was assigned the repetitive task which would last an eternity as punishment for his "rebellion" against the gods.

Sisyphus as Absurd Hero

Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is as much through his passions as through his torture. "Absurd" means unusualness. An absurd person may be unnecessarily mad or crazy about something. He or she may have meaningless ambitions and works. Uncertainty is the basic element of absurdity. Besides, this same term has been used as the opposite of "happiness" in the text. Camus writes- happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth.

He is absurd through his passions. His love for life is absurd. He has put Death in chains just for life, forgetting the truth that his action would bring chaos in the universe. He obtained permission from Pluto, king of the Underworld, to return to the earth in order to chastise his wife, but he enjoyed the earth's life. The beautiful sights of the world had enchained him in enchantation. From the god, recalls, signs of anger, warnings came but they were of no avail. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life are some of the ways that prove him an absurd hero.

Sisyphus is an absurd hero through his torture, too. It said that he told Aesopos about the abduction of his daughter just for water though he knew well that Jupiter, god of thunderbolts, would punish him severely. To the celestial thunderbolts, he preferred the benediction of water. According to the third story, mentioned by Camus, as he refused to return to the Underworld, he was given the assignment of pushing the stone up to the mountain. It is severe, an unspeakable penalty in which Sisyphus is wholly used up toward accomplishing nothing. He makes merely the whole effort of his body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it and push it up a slope a hundred times over, and finally by the effort the purpose is achieved. No sooner has the stone put on the top of the mountain than it rolls down. It reaches again at the lower plain land from where he has to make a new start again. There is certainly no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour like that. He does the work repeatedly, but accomplishing nothing. His effort is meaningless. His accomplishment is nothing. His life is uncertain.

Descent - The Time of Consciousness

Camus is interested at the time of descent of Sisyphus towards the plain to raise the stone again. This is the hour of his consciousness. During this time he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. He has victory over the stone. If one has hope of success, the torture will not be very painful. When one knows own poor condition, with no hope of success, this consciousness becomes tragic. Walpole says that "this world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel". (Walpole, 1776) Sisyphus thinks and feels as well about the world. He has both kinds of experiences. During the descent, Sisyphus thinks and feels the whole extent of his wretched condition. While feeling he sees his condition tragic. Meanwhile, during this self-consciousness, at the time of descent, he also thinks those precious moments that he had passed during his life on the earth. It becomes clear that it was his scorn of the gods, his hatred of death and passion for life that constituted his torture. Recollection of the rare pleasant moments delights his soul. This feeling crowns his victory over the stone, and over the eternal penalty. He knows that there is no fate that cannot be overcome by scorn.

Descent is in sorrow as well as in joy. At the time of descent, when the images of the earth come to his memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, sadness rises in his heart, this becomes the rock's victory, the boundless grief is too heavy to tolerate. Until one knows the truth, he is happy. There are moments of melancholy. These are our nights of Gethsemane. (Taylor, 1995) This is a reference to Christ's discussions with his apostles and agonizing prayer in the garden of Gethsemane on the evening before his crucifixion. The garden was at the foot of the Mount Jerusalem. The nights signify boundless grief felt at the last moments of Christ's life among his disciples. Oedipus, in the play *Oedipus*

the King by Sophocles (429 BC), follows his fate without knowing it. Without knowing the truth, Christ was arrested and tried. Truths are destroyed without knowing them.

At the time of danger, Oedipus also obeys his fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. According to the fate, he kills his father and marries his mother. He becomes the king of Thebes. He enjoys his life until he comes to be the king of Thebes. He enjoys his life until he comes to the truth. When the truth reveals, he destroys his eyes. When he becomes blind and desperate, he finds relief by the guidance of his daughter during exile. He experiences absurd life as a result of happiness. He concludes that "all is well". Similarly, in Russian novel *The Possessed* by Dostoevsky (1872), Kirilov, a character, kills himself. He is an existentialist who believes that man is a unique and isolated individual in a meaningless or hostile world, responsible for his own actions and free to choose his destiny. Having suicide, Kirilov chooses his own destiny. Christ was murdered by the cause of his own disciple. This death had become intolerable for that disciple and for others, too. Christ knew well, but he never minded. Oedipus was destroyed by his fate unknowingly. Yet he believes that all is well. Kirilov had suicide knowingly choosing his own fate. Our Sisyphus chose his own fate and kept on raising the stone up to the mountain repeatedly. All these people confirm the absurd victory over fate. The Ancient wisdom of Christ, Sisyphus and Oedipus confirms the modern heroism of Kirilov.

Sisyphus - Symbol of Mankind

Camus says that the workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when he becomes conscious like Sisyphus at the time of descent. During the conscious mind, he thinks and feels all his wretched condition and all the causes that have constituted his present condition. Like Sisyphus, a man makes his own fate and his own choices and controls own fate. He has pleasure or grief according to his own effort. Camus finds a parallel for man's condition in a world without meaning, a world whose values was self-created or at least community-created, a world in which many people do things as repetitive and as meaningless as what Sisyphus must do. Like Sisyphus, one experiences happiness as well as an absurdity.

Modern Man in an Absurd World

Camus emphasizes that there is only one world. Therefore, a man has all kinds of experiences here. I think he means to say the so-called heaven and hell are here. God and devil are here. Happiness and the absurd (of course, we means to say "sorrow" by the term) are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. Happiness is born out of the absurd and vice versa. "I conclude that all is well." says Oedipus (Sophocles, 429 BC), and that remarks is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. This remark echoes after sorrow every time because sorrow has been resulted out of happiness. A man believes that and prefers to suffering because of dissatisfaction of happiness. The man is dissatisfied and so he makes his fate to be settled in this very world.

Like Sisyphus, when the absurd man contemplates his torment, he silences all the gods and goddesses. He has victory over all the silence of the earth. Rather little voices of the earth rise up. A man experiences god and evil alike. There is no sun without shadow. Therefore, it is essential to know the night. The absurd man does whatever comes ahead. He makes an effort unceasingly. He thinks that these can be personal fate, but that is his own. He has made it by his own effort. Hence, he is not afraid of the result of his fate. Except death, there is no higher destiny. A man hates death. Until the death comes, at least during his short life, he is himself the master of his days. A man becomes more self-conscious and makes all kinds of attempts for satisfaction. Camus says-

"At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which become his fate, created by him combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blindman eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling." (Camus, 1991)

Life goes on. The man finishes one work and another work is found waiting for him. One always finds one's burden again. Sisyphus teaches every man that we can negate the gods and raise rocks. His conclusion is also the same that "all is well". A struggle is a remarkable effort from man's side to make his own world. A man may have sympathy towards Sisyphus while he is pushing the stone up the mountain, but yet he will also think that Sisyphus is happy. Similarly, every person is happy at his fate that brings sorrow or happiness as an achievement of his effort because it is his own fate and it is also his own effort.

Rhetorics

Camus is a literary genius to apply artistic device aphorism or pithy maxims in the work. Simple and ordinary savings have been given to make the entire tone of the passage wise and thoughtful. He writes. "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn". "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth". "There is no sun without shadow"; "One always finds one's burden again." These are aphoristic.

An allusion to different books is also very illustrative and instructive. References to the Bible, to the Oedipus, and to the Dostoevsky's Kirilov are impressive to support his views on the meaningless effort of mankind. A man makes his own fate. He suffers, but yet hides the truth by self-consciousness and consolation that "all is well". Oedipus teaches us by his statement. "I conclude that all is well", that all is not hasn't been exhausted. Happiness is born out of the absurd, and vice versa. Man does work repetitively because he is destined to do so. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism. Camus's style of addressing is also very admirable. This is a one-sided, pleasant and intimate conversation with the text. Most often he addresses his audience in a narrative way and meditatively - sometimes directly and other times, indirectly, too. He is heard addressing as a commentator directly - "As you have already grasped" and again indirectly in meditative tone- "Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock."

CONCLUSIONS

The Myth of Sisyphus is itself an allegory to represent the world of Sisyphus similar to the world of the workman of today. Camus's vision of the meaningless world and effort of man accomplishing nothing is based on the classical myth. What Sisyphus is doing is very parallel to the most people of the present world. The allegory is an analogy to support his argument that man's condition in the world is without meaning. This is the world in which many people do things as repetitive and as meaningless as what Sisyphus must do.

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