Bloom's Literature

Camus Albert

His obstinate humanism, narrow and pure, austere and sensual, waged an uncertain war against the massive and formless events of the time. But on the other hand through his dogged rejections he reaffirmed, at the heart of our epoch, against the Machiavellians and against the Idol of realism, the existence of the moral issue.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, "Tribute to Albert Camus"

Albert Camus intellectually and artistically dominated the post–World War II period in literature. In a career foreshortened by his death in an automobile accident at the age of 46, Camus became the most influential French voice worldwide since Voltaire [69]. Like Beckett [47], Camus diagnosed an absurd world, but only Camus managed to develop an affirming response of reengagement based on the acceptance of existential meaninglessness. His intellectual vigor and stylistic brilliance are evident in his novels, short stories, essays, and plays; these works are intimately connected to his philosophical quest, but are not simply vehicles for his ideas. All of Camus's works have a sensuous and experiential quality that combines thought and feeling into significant artistic forms.

The uniqueness of Camus's thinking and expression derives from his background and an intimate acquaintance with human suffering. He was born in Mondavi, Algeria. His father was killed in the first battle of the Marne in 1914, when Camus was one year old. His deaf mother supported her family as a housecleaner, bringing up her family in a tiny apartment in the working-class section of Algiers. In his first book, Betwixt and Between, a collection of childhood reminiscences and travel sketches, Camus recalls his childhood:

I think of a child who lived in that poor section, that section, that house. There were only two floors and the stairs weren't lighted. Even now, after many long years, he could find his way there in complete darkness…. His body is impregnated with that house. His legs preserve the exact measure of the height of the steps. His hand the instinctive, never vanquished horror of the banisters. Because of the roaches.

Camus won a scholarship to a good high school, but his studies and hopes for an academic career were interrupted by an attack of tuberculosis, the illness that would recur throughout his life. He held a variety of jobs in Algiers in the 1930s, read widely, and acted and wrote for an amateur theatrical company that he founded, the Workers’ Theater. In 1938, Camus became a reporter for the Alger Républicain. His first literary works show the recurrent themes that dominate his writing in the pathos between the sensuous joy derived from the North African landscape and man's essential isolation and loneliness.

In 1942, Camus left Algiers for Paris, where he joined the French resistance and helped edit the underground journal Combat. During the war, Camus formed a friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre and published his most influential books, The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus, and the play Caligula, which collectively defined existentialist philosophy and dominated postwar thinking.

From its deadpan opening line, "Mother died today," The Stranger creates a modern landscape of absurdity. Meursault, the narrator and the archetype for the modern antihero, is governed by sensation alone and displays no feelings at the death of his mother. His detachment and nonconformity eventually lead to his death. In the company of his friend Raymond, Meursault encounters two Arabs on a beach who are in pursuit of Raymond. When his friend puts a revolver in his hand, Meursault kills one of the pursuers, motivated more by the heat and the sun's glare than his friend's plight. At his trial, Meursault is judged less for his crime than for his alienation and refusal to conform to society's rules—"an inhuman monster wholly without moral sense." Sentenced to death, Meursault in his final hours tries to understand his relationship to the world that has condemned him. He gradually realizes the inherent absurdity of his situation and the ultimate truth of the human condition in the "benign indifference of the universe." This knowledge provides a form of liberation that allows Meursault to face his death and accept his fate.

The Myth of Sisyphus is a lengthy essay that distills many of the existential themes of The Stranger. The absurd is represented by the connection between the human condition and the plight of Sisyphus, condemned in Hades to push a stone up a mountain for eternity. By accepting his fate and the essential meaninglessness of his labor, Sisyphus manages a kind of triumph. Camus asserts,
"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." For Camus, man's dignity and heroism begin with fully confronting the world's indifference and hostility and still persisting in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

*Caligula*, generally regarded as Camus's greatest play, reimagines the infamous Roman emperor as an actor whose life is a masquerade and whose cruelty becomes a form of self-definition. If life is without meaning, as Caligula realizes, then power is unbounded by any controls or limits. Caligula's madness and self-destruction, however, result not from his challenge to the cosmos but from his crimes against mankind. "If his truth is the denial of the gods," Camus writes, "his error is the denial of men. He has not understood that you cannot destroy everything without destroying yourself." For Camus, realization of the universe's meaninglessness marks the beginning of morality and man's duty, not their end.

Camus's later works further develop the existential and moral themes of these three central works. His other plays are *The Misunderstanding* (1944), *The State of Siege* (1948), and *The Just Assassins* (1950). His essay "The Rebel" (1951), which outlines an ethical rather than political rebellion, prompted his split from Sartre, who adhered to a more ideological stance in the existential dilemma that both writers popularized internationally. Camus's novel *The Plague* (1947), concerning the effects of an epidemic in the North African city of Oran, shows a shift of emphasis from the fate of the individual to that of the community. As the disease advances, the city is closed to the outside world and gripped by a sense of exile and isolation. The tragedy, however, forces a growing interdependence and solidarity among the inhabitants. Doing one's job becomes the way to meet the challenge of absurd extinction, and Camus describes resistance to the forces that destroy happiness and value as the means for triumphing over suffering and death.

Camus's philosophy, derived from his own experience with suffering and absurdity, embraced a solution to man's predicament based on a hard-fought struggle to reach meaning. Camus regarded his happiest times as those spent working on a newspaper and acting and directing in the theater, both collective activities and antidotes to man's isolation and loneliness. The ultimate irony of Camus's life is the absurdity of his death in a traffic accident. The works that he left are some of literature's strongest and most artistic confrontations with such senseless events and their existential implications.