Albert Camus was one of the most influential French writers of the 20th century. A novelist, essayist, playwright, and journalist, Camus was a leading voice in literature as well as politics concerning human rights, freedom, and national independence. His work has long been linked to the philosophical ideas of existentialism and the absurd, two intellectual concepts prominent in the first half of the 20th century. His novels often explore the meaning of humankind's search for values, ethics, and purpose in a world devoid of God. Camus is often compared to André Malraux, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other postwar writers in breaking with the traditional bourgeois novel. Camus's interest turned from then-popular psychological analysis toward philosophical problems such as humankind's existence in the state of the absurd.

Camus is perhaps best known for his novels The Stranger (L'étranger, 1942), The Plague (La peste, 1947), and The Fall (La chute, 1956), and for his short essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" ("Le mythe de Sisyphe," 1942). These philosophically enriched works sustain an intricate balance between the complexities of modern ideas and the simplicity of storytelling. Camus's writing plumbs such human conditions and frailties as war, suicide, revolt, absurdism, and atheism. Throughout his life, he was an ardent advocate of human rights and a steadfast denunciator of war and violence. He became a symbol for the conscience of humankind that abhorred inflexible political ideas. He saw no distinction between art and humanity, but rather viewed art as a means to bringing solutions to the problems facing the human race. In 1957 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for his literary and political writing.

Albert Camus was born in Mondovia, Algeria, a French colony at the time, on November 7, 1913. His parents were Lucien Camus and Helen Sintes, French immigrants who sought a better economic life in the French colony. The family's hopes were soon dashed. Camus's father, a member of the First Zouave Regiment, died in 1914 during World War I's bloody battle of the Marne in France. The news of her husband's death caused Camus's mother to suffer a stroke that produced hearing loss and a speech impediment. The effects of war remained a continuous theme throughout the author's literary career.

Fatherless, Camus and his older brother grew up in extreme poverty. School life at the local Belcourt schools became an oasis from his squalid home circumstances. As a young student, Camus showed a keen ability in academics, the theater, and athletics. He was befriended by Louis Germain, a teacher, who tutored him to pass the entrance exams in 1923 for the lycée, an exclusive secondary school for students destined for the university. Camus was later accepted to the University of Algiers's school of philosophy. During his university studies, he contracted tuberculosis, a disease that undermined his health for the rest of his life. These health problems forced him to continue his studies intermittently at the university, and he received his diplome d'études supérieures (similar to an M.A.) from the University of Algiers in philosophy late in 1936. His goal of becoming a teacher was never realized because he could not pass the health examination due to his history of tuberculosis.

The decade between 1930 and 1940 produced turbulence and change on many fronts for the young Camus. He was searching for his place in the world as he entered his 20s. In 1934, while still a student, he joined the Communist Party. This began a period of fervent political activism that lasted throughout his life, although he soon broke with the communists. He became disillusioned with the strident political propaganda that called for change at the cost of human lives. While no longer a communist, Camus remained a socialist until his death in 1960.

In 1934 Camus married Simone Hie, but this union proved to be ill-fated. The daughter of a wealthy and upper-class ophthalmologist, Simone suffered from drug addiction. The marriage was short-lived. In 1940 Camus married again, this time to Francine Faure, a mathematics teacher from Oran; they had two children.

At the university between 1935 and 1939, Camus helped to found the Workers' Theater, a theatrical project designed to produce socialist plays for the benefit of Algerian workers. His foray into playwriting came as a collaboration with other young radical intellectuals on a political play, Revolte dans les Asturies. The theater company also produced plays by Malraux, John Millington Synge, André Gide, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Writing became Camus's direction in life. His professional writing career began as a reporter for the left-wing Alger-Republicain,
The first half of the 1940s brought Camus face-to-face with war once again. In 1940 he left his home in Algeria for Paris with the hope of becoming a reporter for the leftist press in the French center. The invasion of France by the German army put an end to these aspirations, and he fled Paris to North Africa. Upon his return to Algeria, Camus began teaching in Oran, where he met Francine Faure, who became his second wife. A pacifist, he wrote articles against the war in Europe, writings that placed him under the suspicion of the government in France and Algeria. He was soon declared a threat to national security and forced to leave the country.

Forced into exile, Camus returned to occupied France to work as a member of the French resistance. He was not well received and again fell under suspicion, becoming a man without a country, though he did secure a reporting post for the newspaper Paris-Soir. The newspaper staff was forced to relocate to the western port city of Bordeaux to escape capture by the Nazis. During this year—still 1940—Camus was constantly on the run, but he also wrote the manuscripts of a series of works for what he termed The Absurds, one of his most prolific achievements. The Absurds is a trilogy consisting of The Stranger, "The Myth of Sisyphus," and The Plague, works that brought Camus international literary recognition.

The two parts of The Absurds that best exemplify Camus's literary canon are the companion pieces The Stranger and "The Myth of Sisyphus," both published in 1942 and both addressing the philosophical subject of the absurd. In each text the central figures exist in an irrational and puzzling world.

Camus envisioned the absurd as a great divide between humankind's desire for happiness and a world that is unsuited for such an end. On the one hand, an individual seeks a world governed by the forces of justice and order, an existence he can comprehend rationally. In this world, good and justice are rewarded. On the other hand, the individual encounters the actual world, which is chaotic, irrational, and meaningless, and one which brings suffering before a meaningless death to mortals. Within this modern interpretation of the French philosopher René Descartes's fundamental premise—from "I think therefore I am" to "I exist therefore I am"—Camus concluded that man should not accept the absurdity of the universe but should revolt against this irrationality, this indifference. Revolt, for Camus and other existentialists, comes in the form of a new humanism: Old values are discarded in lieu of new values centered on the individual living in a social context.

Perhaps Camus's most widely read novel is The Stranger, which was published in 1942. The Stranger describes the tragic story of Meursault, a young man who is a stranger to those around him and an enigma to readers. The famous opening line of the short novel offers a glimpse into the action that occupies the entire work. Upon reading a telegram announcing his mother's death, Meursault is left uncertain whether she died on that day or the previous day. His reactions to his mother's passing also remain opaque. Throughout the novel, the reader is not availed of Meursault's thoughts and feelings toward his mother, his girlfriend, his murder of a stranger, and his acceptance of his conviction and execution for his senseless crime. Camus relates the story in the first person, a limited point of view that elides most of Meursault's feelings and reactions to the happenings in the novel.

The story of The Stranger is structured around three deaths and how Meursault faces the question of mortality. The death of his mother is announced at the opening of the novel. In the middle of the story, Meursault senselessly kills a stranger, and at the book's end, he faces execution for his crime. What has continuously appealed to readers is Meursault's indifference to all emotion and passion. He appears apathetic toward the three deaths, even the approach of his own execution. In one way, readers can see Meursault as the absurd character because he mirrors the indifference of the universe. While readers traditionally may seek to understand and comprehend Meursault as a fictional character, he remains outside of the boundary of definitive exegesis.

Mersault is the quintessential antihero. He is tough although ultimately vulnerable. Camus admired the tough persona of the characters found in such Ernest Hemingway novels as The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms. He also attempted to imitate the restraint and conciseness in the writing style that had gained great popularity in the middle of the 20th century.

Camus's powerful essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," written in the same year as The Stranger, explains his notion of the absurd and...
The apparent indifference of the universe to humankind's innate desire for happiness and justice in the world. It also addresses the difference between individual despair and loss of hope. "The Myth of Sisyphus" is a retelling of the Greek story of the unfortunate Sisyphus, who had angered the gods and was sentenced to an inhuman fate: to ceaselessly roll a tremendous stone to the top of a mountain, whereupon the rock would roll back to the bottom of the mountain of its own weight. Sisyphus would again and again take up his toil.

The deities deemed that no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor existed; they thought they could relish watching Sisyphus's torment. Camus recognized the inherent parallel between Sisyphus's mindless and habitual toil and modern humankind's everyday, mechanical, clock-driven existence. Ironically, however, Camus considered that one must ultimately view Sisyphus as happy. This position sparked remarkable debate the world over, as the essay received widespread popularity. Given that hope is lost for Sisyphus's release from his eternal fate, how can the tragic figure be viewed as happy? Camus considered that happiness and victory or triumph of self can prevail only if—as in Sisyphus's dire and unalterable circumstances—the unfortunate figure accepts his absurd condition.

Camus imagines Sisyphus as becoming one with his fate; through his acceptance of it, he becomes defiant and rebellious. He finds freedom in his ability to rise above his fate, at least in his mind, and through this conscious position he defeats the gods and his fate. Thus the individual rises above his circumstances and makes the best of them, working his task without bemoaning his fate. Sisyphus would become a pathetic and unfortunate figure if, according to Camus, he wasted his strength and effort through wailing against the inevitability decreed by the gods. It is through this conscious position that Sisyphus raises himself up: By his defiance and rebellion against the gods, but not against his daily task, Sisyphus redeems himself. This can only occur if one thinks of Sisyphus as happy—defiant and rebellious.

Like "The Myth of Sisyphus," The Plague, published in 1947, works on a mythic level. The popular novel captures a sense of myth in modern language. Based on Daniel Defoe's account in A Journal of the Plague Year (1665), Camus's The Plague is an allegorical story of the German invasion of Europe during World War II. The metaphor of the plague becomes the faceless evil for the German occupation of France. In this novel, the city of Oran is overrun with rats carrying a devastating plague that infects its citizens. There seems to be no way out of this senseless devastation. Once the plague is finally diagnosed, the city undergoes strict quarantine, and no one is allowed in or out, cutting them off from the outside world. The dead count starts to mount in astronomical numbers. The question arises: Why has this disease come to Oran and what, if anything, can be done about it? Yet no human action, regardless of its degree or merit, proves helpful in stopping the carnage; human action pales in light of the plague's indomitable nature, an army indiscriminately destroying human life in Oran.

Criticism regarding The Plague at the time of publication in 1947 centered on Camus's description of the German occupation of France and other countries in Western Europe through the faceless image of a plague rather than a more direct graphic representation of evil human forces.

Despite the hardships of World War II, the war years had proven to be a turning point for Camus in terms of philosophy, social activism, and writing. During the mid-1940s, he became friends with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The three French intellectuals met often at Café de Flore on the Boulevard St-Germain, in an area known as the Left Bank, to discuss literature and politics.

Camus and Sartre first met in 1943 in Paris at the opening of Sartre's allegorical play The Flies, which denounced German collaboration. They initially shared a close friendship despite their contrasting economic backgrounds. Sartre grew up in a well-to-do middle-class environment, as opposed to Camus's dire poverty. Philosophically, the two writers were both social radicals, denouncing conservative measures that were seen as imposing injustices on the impoverished. Sartre was the key proponent of existentialism, a philosophy espousing the doctrine that man is utterly free from all shaping or controlling forces like religion, economics, culture, and politics to make his life what he wants to. Sartre's tenet that "existence precedes essence" reverses the traditional precept that humankind is endowed with certain innate fundamental spiritual and moral characteristics.

Although often misunderstood as an existentialist, Camus rejected this extreme label. His belief, in contrast to Sartre, focused on social responsibility and value. Camus is more rightly considered an absurdist, viewing humankind as possessing longings, hopes, and aspirations to which the universe does not respond. This is the essence of his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus."

Both Camus's The Stranger (1942) and Sartre's novel Nausea (1938) expounded on the meaninglessness of human existence in
a world fraught with war and a loss of God. World War II and the Nazi occupation of France offered graphic representation to their ideas exploring absurdism and existentialism. Prior to their first meeting in 1943, the two writers had written positive reviews of the other's writing. Camus had discovered Sartre's writing in 1938 when he reviewed *Nausea* for an Algerian left-wing daily paper. He was then in his early 20s, having published two small books of essays: *The Wrong Side and the Right Side (L'envers et l'endroit, 1937)* and *Nuptials. (Noces, 1938).* Camus showed remarkable talent and insight in his reviews of many new fictional works published in Paris: Gide's *The Counterfeiters,* Paul Nizan's *The Conspiracy,* Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wind,* Aldous Huxley's *Those Barren Leaves,* Jorge Amado's *Bahia,* and Sartre's *Nausea* and *The Wall.* Sartre, meanwhile, in comparing Camus to Hemingway and Franz Kafka, admired *The Stranger* for the novel's simplicity of language, plot, and character development.

The friendship between Camus and Sartre came to a halt in 1952. For nearly a decade the two men had gained a reputation as the two leading intellectuals in the French language. Though both had helped to shape the history and future of France, their aesthetic and political attitudes changed after World War II. Two reasons can be attributed to their break. First, both writers published harsh articles and reviews about the other's work, attacks that were primarily based on political terms. These articles produced wounds that would not heal. Second, Camus and Sartre had proceeded down divergent political paths. Camus had long previously condemned the Communist Party for its acceptance of radical violence. His anticommunism called into question leftist ideas that advocated revolutionary violence, particularly against innocent immigrants in Algeria. These themes were developed in essays published in the nonfiction work *The Rebel (L'homme revolte, 1951).* This work directly examines the dangers of absolute political and religious ideas, particularly the transformation of revolutions into tyrannies. *The Rebel* warns against the excesses of revolution that have often manifested themselves in brutality, poverty, and purges through death hunts. Sartre's reaction emerged as vitriolic and visceral. He felt that Camus's denunciation of revolution had bolstered the forces opposing communism. Sartre remained an extreme Marxist and communist who backed violent reprisals against colonialists in Algeria. Algeria, Camus's homeland, remained a wedge separating the two men. Sartre called for violent rebellion against the French occupation in North Africa. Camus, on the other hand, sought a peaceful solution. The two men remained estranged until Sartre read a eulogy at his rival's funeral in 1960.

For several years Camus remained silent as a novelist, until, in 1956, he published *The Fall.* The work investigates Camus's frequent theme of judgment that the author initiated in *The Stranger.* The central figure, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, travels from Paris, the city of light, to the decadent, fog-bound world of Amsterdam. The novel is a monologue by Clamence in which he judges his life, seeing himself as having fallen from grace. The tone of *The Fall* remains extremely ironic throughout as the narrator, a Parisian lawyer who has enjoyed his virtuous nature and hedonistic lifestyle, describes his descent from a privileged existence to an awareness of his impoverished regard for others. As a lawyer defending the accused in front of judges, Clamence has remained free from human and divine judgment. However, fallen from the heights of a penthouse in Paris to a bar in the depths of Amsterdam's low country, he finds himself assessing his own life.

In addition to his fame as a novelist, Camus was highly regarded as a playwright. His two most noteworthy dramatic writings include *Caligula* (1938) and *Cross Purpose* (1944). In *Caligula,* Camus addresses how power is used as a malignant force in response to a meaningless universe. A young and tyrannical Roman emperor, Caligula punishes the populace after the senseless death of his beloved sister Drusilla, terrorizing them by going on a killing spree, murdering his subjects at random. He eventually welcomes his own assassination. *Cross Purpose* is another play that addresses the absurdity of existence. The main figure returns home to the inn his mother and sister run after traveling the world for two decades. Uncertain how to explain his surprise return after a long absence, the prodigal son elects to spend the night at the inn, posing as a stranger. What he does not know is that his mother and sister murder and rob rich travelers. The prodigal son becomes the next victim. After the family members discover his true identity, they commit suicide, a popular outcome for Camus.

Among the many awards Camus received, the 1957 Nobel Prize in literature recognized the author's international and timeless qualities. He was only 43 years old, distinguishing him as one of the youngest recipients of the coveted prize. Regrettably, his promising life was cut short. Less than three years after his recognition in Stockholm, Camus was killed in an automobile accident near Sens, France, on January 4, 1960. He was returning to Paris in an automobile driven by his publisher and friend, Michel Gallimard. Found in his papers at the accident site was the manuscript of the novel *The First Man (Le premier homme)* a fictionalized account of his family history that was finally published in 1995.

**Further Information**


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