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The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Rebellion and the Absurd:  
Reading the Novels of Albert Camus**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of  
English and Comparative Literature  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

**Basma Bishay**

Under the supervision of  
**Dr. William Melaney**

**May 2018**

The American University in Cairo

**Rebellion and the Absurd:**  
**Reading the Novels of Albert Camus**

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Has been approved by

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a critical reading of Albert Camus's novels, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, which is consistent with his reflections on the theory of the absurd. Employing this theory as the philosophical foundation for my writing, I set out to scrutinize Camus's protagonists in terms of their being-in-this-world, particularly in view of the author's understanding of rebellion. Although Camus's theory of the absurd seems to cancel out the meaning and value of personal effort, the two novels under examination suggest that a rebellious response to life's inherent absurdity is not only possible but is a credible response to the human condition. In my study of Camus's rebellious protagonists, therefore, I also examine the question of ethics in both its personal and social implications.

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## **Introduction:**

### **The Birth of Absurdity and Rebellion**

It is during times of major collective disasters that the individual begins examining and questioning the significance of his own existence in relation to the events at hand. Catastrophes, such as wars and plagues show no partiality. They are indifferent to the lives of individual persons. During such trying times, the single human being considers himself for himself. Such was the case for artist and thinker, Albert Camus, as he began producing his provocative works towards the end of the Second World War.

Prior to his canonical works and publications, Camus had been a strong advocate for the many promises of Communism. He had joined the party in 1935, speaking boldly and influentially against fascism and all the war and violence associated with it. Despite his genuine commitment to the party and the ideologies it was said to uphold, Camus's journey briefly went as follows: “[h]e had begun his work for the Communists going door to door in Belcourt to recruit Muslim members. But Moscow was concerned about the coming war, and activism in favor of indigenous Algerians was not a priority. Camus was purged—a report to the Comintern said he was a ‘Trotskyist agitator’” (Kaplan 13). The party proved not to act in line with the ideals that Camus so faithfully held onto, and it was after his expulsion from the party in 1937 that Camus began identifying what he believed to be the real problem: while trying to rebuild a better world, people were denying the crucial aspects of life's realities. He believed in the forward fight for the collective good; but he also recognized the undeniable and unavoidable need for individual recognition and validation.

Over the course of World War II, thinkers and artists (such as Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom Camus had a complicated relationship) were both collectively and individually pondering the ontological question of ‘being’. Perhaps one of the earliest contributors to this

question was René Descartes, who made the well-known claim, “I think, therefore I am”. According to Descartes, one’s ability to think acted as the primary substantiation for one’s existence. While this statement held true in some philosophers’ minds, Sartre later updated Descartes and said, “I am, therefore I think”—which was to say that existence precedes a man’s essence. According to Sartre, we are all born as a *tabula rasa*, so to speak—a blank page. All contingency and possibility lies in our everyday shaping and sculpting of ourselves, as well as our responses of choice to our surroundings. Absurdity, according to Sartre, consisted in the fact that society (or any other external force) assumed the right to inflict any identity on the individual who was in the process of becoming. As far as he was concerned, each individual man is basically ‘pour soi’, for itself. Man evolves and creates himself as he goes, never succumbing to any one limiting condition.

Sartre was far from being the only thinker to have thought in this subjective way, which naturally lead the now ‘existentialist’ philosophers to also question the usual understanding of religion, upon which societies were instituted. Religious presuppositions and ideologies are often taken as ultimate truths. When existentialists took the stage, not only was the question of religion (as an institution) placed under the microscope, but so was that of God. Friedrich Nietzsche, a precursor to existentialism, has already made his infamous claim: “God is dead” (*The Gay Science* 125). Nietzsche even added, “[w]e deny God, we deny the responsibility of God, it is only thus that we will deliver the world” (qtd.in. *The Rebel* 65). Such a statement would have seemed especially bold at such a critical time as the Second World War, because it implied that man’s fate resides in his own hands and the hands of those around him. This concept of human responsibility is fundamental to the thought of Sartre, Nietzsche and Camus.

Having briefly placed Camus’s theories within the context of his time, we may be able to develop a clearer understanding of the intellectual world in which he developed. The

traditional role of religion in society was to create meaning in an individual's existence; one is born to do the works of God, with the hopeful insurance that the afterlife will be eternal and rewarding. Thus, any prior question of man's existence was always posed in relation to the disclosed fragments of God's character. Writer and artist, Camus, in contrast, believed life to be gratuitous and frail. Through his lens, man is thrown into this world without having a say in the matter only to endure meaningless days, ask grand questions to which the universe is indifferent, and then die. The supposition that there is no afterlife meant to Camus that life has no intrinsic meaning.

Camus was born in the French colonial Algeria, where he was raised by his deaf and mute mother under financially difficult circumstances. It has been argued that Camus allowed "the circumstances and feelings of his childhood to guide his creative work" (Kaplan 10). For the majority of his early years, Camus led a quiet life in which he became fond of artists such as André Gide. But it wasn't until he was diagnosed with a detrimental illness that he began pondering the question of absurdity:

[Camus] had studied the absurd in philosophy class, but his own sense of the concept came from his own body, from an illness contracted at age seventeen that threatened his sensual delight in the world around him. All men were condemned to death, some sooner than others. It was absurd not only that life was finite but also that humans were meaningless before the physical world. (Kaplan 8).

Having wanted to pursue a career in philosophy but having been rejected due to illness, Camus's frustrations grew and his true commitment to his thoughts intensified. His sophisticated reflections at the age of seventeen were far from being the only sign that the thinker was ahead of himself: "A journalist, a political activist, a writer, a man of the theater,



a lover, briefly a husband, a son to his mother, a child of his poor neighborhood, Belcourt— by the time he was twenty-five, Camus had played many roles. That was the problem.” (Kaplan 14).

Camus married Simone Hié, a bourgeois woman he believed would be “an ideal writer’s wife,” at the age of twenty one, and moved to Hydra, a bourgeois suburb in the heights of Algeria. When the artist and his wife divorced, in the fall of 1936, however, Camus moved to Telemly, another bourgeois suburb—to recover from the separation. In travelling to his house, again located on a considerable height, Camus claimed that “there was no climbing it without feeling as if you had made a conquest” (Kaplan 23). Given the fact that it was around this same time that Camus was developing his thoughts on what would become *The Myth of Sisyphus* just a few years later, his daily commute was nothing short of a metaphor in itself.

In 1942, Camus published his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which serves as the foundational framework for his theory of the absurd. Inspired by the famous Greek myth, Camus’s essay is the narration of a man named Sisyphus and his condemnation to eternal punishment by the gods. The original myth is told as follows: having displeased the gods throughout his earthly life, Sisyphus was banished to a lonely place, where he was assigned the task of rolling a rock up a mountain. Every time the rock made it to the top, Sisyphus would find that it inevitably fell back down again, at which point, he would have to make the conscious choice of making his way down to start his journey from the beginning. There was one condition, however, wherein Sisyphus was faced with a choice: he could, theoretically, decide not to push the rock up the mountain once more. But if he were to make this decision, he would also be deciding to end his life. In other words, if Sisyphus were to rebel against the gods’ assigned punishment of his earthly disobedience, he would ultimately be committing suicide.

Thus goes the Greek myth, and as far as Greek mythology is concerned, this was all there was to it: it was the story of a man who pays a severe price for displeasing the gods. In other words, Sisyphus was the Greek archetype of a rebellious man— until Camus gave the myth a new meaning. Sisyphus, in Camus’s philosophical version of the story, is portrayed as everyman. Thrown into an environment of routine and pre-organized chore, everyman is socially and culturally (previously, even religiously) expected to roll up his own rock, so to speak. Each day, everyman rises to begin his mundane endeavor and is expected to walk the straight path that is afore-ordained and institutionalized. It is at the top of the mountain, however, that everyman watches his rock fall; and it is as everyman watches his rock fall that he finally becomes conscious, when and where “the only thing that differentiates a man from a vegetable in this absurd world, is man’s consciousness” (Shoukri, interview 5). Fully comprehending that he must die in the end anyway, his real choice is to either renounce his life or to somehow consciously accept it without being able to believe that it has any intrinsic meaning.

In the Greek myth, Sisyphus chooses the latter, endlessly making his way back to the bottom of the mountain again, to roll his rock back up, 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 becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 123). Sisyphus is in no way portrayed by Camus as a victim. Instead, he is presented as a man who consciously chooses the project of pushing a rock up a hill, which is why “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 123). In his essay, Camus’s emphasis on the element of consciousness is fundamental to our understanding of the philosophy behind his theory of the absurd. Not once does Camus negate the existence of a preset system and ordinance. Nonetheless, it is Sisyphus’s consciousness that gives his decision dignity:

All Sisyphus's silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols . . . The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* 123

This "joy" and "happiness" is the result of a purely conscious choice.

Where, then, is the absurdity of the matter, if Sisyphus—as everyman—is happy? According to Camus, the gods sent Sisyphus to the underworld to fulfill his punishment because, "[t]hey had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 119). His project—endlessly pushing the rock up the hill—was intended to be an arduous task that would keep him hopelessly busy and occupied. However, repeatedly faced with the choice to end his life, Sisyphus is seen as an absurd hero, "as much through his passions as through his torture" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 120). Only a close reading of the text substantiates Sisyphus's conscious choice of pushing the rock as a passionate affirmation. The absurdity then becomes this very grip on life, which seems to no avail. But this understanding of Sisyphus's absurdity begs the question: Would suicide have been the more understandable solution in the case of the tragic hero's plight? Would it have made more sense for him—also consciously—to end a life that has no future? In answering this question and gaining a better understanding of Camus's view of Sisyphus, we might consider another one of his philosophical works, which discusses rebellion as the only comparable alternative to suicide.

Just one year prior to his publication of his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus published his long meditation, *The Rebel*, which proposed rebellion as a direct answer to the theory of the absurd: "[*The Rebel*] proposes, in the face of murder and rebellion, to pursue a train of thought which began with suicide and the idea of the absurd" (*The Rebel* 5). Camus

follows his own train of thought to the point of discovering that suicide, as a response to the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, would also be in compliance with this strong sense of negation, arguing that “[t]hirty years ago, before reaching a decision to kill, people denied many things, to the point of denying themselves by suicide” (*The Rebel* 4). But before one’s attention shifts towards the question of murder, which Camus draws upon as the follow-up argument to his theory of the absurd, one may come to understand Sisyphus’s rebellion in light of the hopelessness of his situation as underscored by his consciousness. For it is his conscious decision to keep rolling the rock uphill that is a resilient act of rebellion against this idea of self-negation, despite the pressing external influences in the direction of his inevitable hopelessness. In other words, Sisyphus chose to live, however mundane and meaningless a life, proving himself to be a defiant rebel against what was otherwise expected of him—to complacently give up on his life, as was the gods’ initial expectation.

Camus’s presentation of Sisyphus as a conscious hero presents him as the author’s first literary rebel. Moreover, the question of Sisyphus’s consciousness must be considered to a greater extent, given the fact that it is pivotal in understanding his rebellion: “In a certain way, the absurd, which claims to express man in his solitude, really makes him live in front of a mirror” (*The Rebel* 8). This is the situation of Sisyphus during his moment of consciousness, which occurs as he decides to return to the base of the mountain to push his rock back up again. At that moment, Sisyphus contemplates his life—facing his reflection in the mirror, so to speak—and upon his self-reflection, finds it within himself to take up his plight once more. But if the theory of the absurd is as deeply rooted in the belief that life is meaningless, there lies a contradiction within the theory itself, for one would not logically be able to ascribe meaning to Sisyphus’s ‘heroic’ rebellion, if the theory of the absurd itself enabled no room for meaning to begin with. “It is contradictory in its content because, in

wanting to uphold life, it excludes all value judgments, when to live is, in itself, a value judgment” (*The Rebel* 8).

How, then, can Sisyphus so repeatedly and stubbornly choose life over death? In his attempt to respond to this logical question, Camus does not abandon his initial commitment to the notion of the absurd: “I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my proclamation and I must at least believe in my protest.” Nonetheless, he also maintains that “[t]he first and only evidence that is supplied me, within the terms of absurdist experience, is rebellion,” which means that rebellion must justify itself on the basis of internal reflection, instead of looking for justification elsewhere: “It must consent to examine itself in order to learn how to act” (*The Rebel* 10). It is through this reasoning that one may be able to understand the source of Sisyphus’s drive for rebellion.

If one is to define Sisyphus’s insistence on rolling the rock back up the hill as an act of rebellion, and if one is ultimately to consider Sisyphus to be a rebel, then one must also understand what the term ‘rebel’ meant for Camus. For Camus is not interested in merely defining the term, but in doing so within the context of a theory of the absurd. “What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion” (*The Rebel* 13). Camus illustrates his definition of a rebel by providing the example of a slave’s relationship with his owner. If the slave were to comply with his master’s treatment, he would maintain a silence as he obeys the instructions given. However, a rebellious slave says no to his master when he feels that his boundaries have been overstepped, ultimately also saying yes to his definition of what is a just way of treatment. However, such a definition of a rebel also implies an underlying sense of self-worth that the rebellious slave must have, which agrees with the prior-mentioned self-born and self-driven motivation for rebellion in the first place. Needless to say, this crucial sense of self-worth must also mean that the rebel possesses a

sense of awareness—exhibited throughout the diagnosis of Sisyphus’s consciousness, self-awareness and capacity for reflection.

Camus wrote his novels and essays at a time when existentialism was at its height. After a war that impacted everyone alive, man’s worth, purpose, and meaning took center stage among thinkers and artists alike. Having witnessed the futility and impermanence of human life, many philosophers took up the grander questions of existence, establishing a platform in which God was no longer assumed to be an absolute foundation. Man was placed in the center of reflection, which ultimately informed Camus’s theory of the absurd. At the end of his unsuccessful engagement with communism, Camus began to direct his thought towards the role of the individual in the midst of it all. Finding that life was indeed meaningless and absurd, the French thinker and novelist insisted on discovering a reason behind man’s struggle and insistence on living. And it was in that context that he discovered the role of rebellion—the resilient rejection of institutionalized ideals and the hope of independent change. Camus’s definition of rebellion allowed for the possibility of heroic sacrifice for a greater change during man’s allotted time on earth. In essence, Camus reasoned that since man must exist in the world, his time in this world must be for an effective reason.

Camus’s theoretical and philosophical works—*The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*—provided the basis for the artistic works that followed. Through the established lens of his philosophical works, one must read and engage with his novels, if one is to consider them fully. Perhaps two of his most poetic but also intellectually substantial novels are *The Stranger* (1946) and *The Plague* (1948). Although both works differ in style and content, they both employ characters that depict the author’s rebellious ideals in fictional contexts that portray the absurdity of this world. By closely analyzing the two novels, and scrutinizing the protagonists and their surroundings, we may be able to reconcile Camus’s theory of the absurd with his celebration of rebellion. For the French thinker and artist, societal and

political rebellion proved to be the only justifiable response to an absurd world that provides no answers to man's questions. It is through rebellion that the individual can be authentic and can stand apart from the whole. According to Camus, as this thesis will argue, it is in standing apart from the whole that man can really understand his being-in-this-world.

## Chapter One: *The Stranger* and Societal Rebellion

Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges. (*The Rebel* 3)

Perhaps one of Camus's most prominent and philosophically deliberated works is his novel, *The Stranger*, written in the year 1946. The French author was believed to have begun working on this novel without being aware of it himself. He had been considering different attributes of his characters, largely based on both real people from his life and his own self, weaving them into a first draft, *A Happy Death*, a narrative in which “there were already plenty of upstairs neighbors making a commotion in *A Happy Death* when suddenly [Camus's] ear became attuned to different footsteps. On their own, the characters of *The Stranger* entered the apartment of his mind and made themselves heard” (Kaplan 29). But Camus needed to separate himself from his creative work and construct the figure of Meursault before he could compose *The Stranger*. “In April 1937, Camus wrote in his notebook, ‘Story: the man who doesn't want to justify himself. He prefers the idea others have of him. He dies, only he retains the consciousness of his truth—vanity of this consolation’” (Kaplan 29).

The story of *The Stranger* is remarkable in its literary accessibility. Camus utilizes the voice of the protagonist himself to narrate some seemingly mundane and common events, which take place over the period of a few months. What appear to be unrelated events as they are first told are analyzed in correlation to one another in a courtroom, dismissing Meursault as an immoral antichrist. Camus creates the character of Meursault in efforts to display an individual's rebellion against society. Thus, through Meursault, Camus challenges the idea of ‘the collective’, placing individual convictions in contrast to what is wholly agreed upon as being ‘acceptable’. By closely analyzing the protagonist's actions and overall temperament,



one may be able to identify the ways by which Camus underscores his theory of the absurd in relation to the futility and meaninglessness of life.

We might attribute Meursault's indifference to life to his realization of life's futility and meaninglessness. By recalling and meticulously unfolding the implications of his actions (and lack thereof) throughout *The Stranger*, we learn much about Meursault's character. For instance, in rejecting all offers of help that come his way, Meursault proves himself to be an assertive rebel, despite his seemingly passive relation to his surrounding society. Camus presents the reader of *The Stranger* with a protagonist who commits the most unspeakable crime, namely, murder. In not complying with the religious standards of society, Meursault's indifference concerning what it means to have committed a violent murder leaves him baffled at the severity of the punishment he receives. Meursault presents his existence as a testament to the futility of life, as well as to the certainty of death, rebelling against the collective, even during the last moments of his life.

The novel begins with Meursault's reception of a letter, the contents of which inform him of his mother's death. This is news that, to the average human being, would be visibly devastating and substantial. He narrates the events in the first person as follows: "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (Camus 3). Immediately, and as far as the reader's first impression is concerned, Meursault comes across as an aloof and distant character, whose fragmented manner of speech sets him off as a mechanical human being. He narrates the events following his reception of the telegram, wherein he arrives at the nursing home and inopportunely takes off one day of work.

Throughout the brief and concise narration, we learn that Meursault's mother already had been living at the nursing home for one year. Throughout this period, Meursault has not

visited her once, with the excuse that she had gotten “used to it”. He continues: “That’s partly why I didn’t go there much this past year. And also because it took up my Sunday—not to mention the trouble of getting to the bus, buying tickets, and spending two hours travelling” (Camus 5). His mother’s death had resulted in discomfort and inconvenience. He comments on his boss’s reaction when he tells him that he would have to leave:

I even said, ‘Its not my fault.’ He didn’t say anything. Then I thought I shouldn’t have said that. After all, I didn’t have anything to apologize for . . . For now, it’s almost as if Maman weren’t dead. After the funeral, though, the case will be closed, and everything will have a more official feel to it. (Camus 3)

His need to apologize for his mother’s death speaks in itself for how little the event meant to him— all it amounted to was a disruption of life’s monotony.

Nonetheless, Meursault takes a day off work to attend his mother’s funeral and manages to sleep for the entirety of the trip to Marengo. At the home, the protagonist is met with one of the caretakers, who runs to catch up with him and say, “We put the cover on, but I’m supposed to unscrew the casket so you can see her”, to which Meursault objected and stopped him. ““You don’t want to?” I answered, ‘No.’” He was quiet, and I was embarrassed because I felt I shouldn’t have said that” (Camus 6). When the caretaker asked him why he didn’t want to see his mother one last time before the burial, Meursault’s reaction was simply and bluntly that he didn’t know—he simply couldn’t find any particular reason to want to take one last glance at his mother.

These two incidents—his apology for having to leave work, and his denial to take one final look at his mother—help us familiarize ourselves with the protagonist’s character. Immediately upon apologizing to him, Meursault realizes that his boss is supposed to extend his condolences, which he predicts will happen upon his return when his boss sees that he is

“in mourning” (Camus 3). Meursault realized that in such instances, one was ‘expected’ to mourn, and ultimately, condolences were ‘expected’ to be extended. Furthermore, Meursault immediately felt embarrassed at having denied the caretaker’s offer to uncover his mother one last time. The reason for his embarrassment was merely that he “felt [he] shouldn’t have said that”. Meursault’s comments on the first two primary events of the novel prove that he is reflective and acknowledges the existence of a certain code of social conduct. Even still, a distinction is established between what is ‘supposed’ to happen versus what Meursault actually says and does, revealing that his initial impulse is never to obey social rules.

Before the funeral ceremony, Meursault finds himself in “a very bright whitewashed room with a skylight for a roof.” He goes on to describe every detail of his surroundings, revealing a strong level of scrutiny and attention to environmental details. The furniture consisted of some chairs and some cross-shaped sawhorses. Two of them, in the middle of the room, were supporting a closed casket. All you could see were some shiny screws, not screwed down all the way, standing out against the walnut-stained planks. Near the casket was an Arab nurse in a white smock, with a brightly colored scarf on her head.

(Camus 6)

Repeatedly, Meursault’s descriptions of his surroundings show him to be a man of scrutiny and heightened physical sensitivity—traits that seem to be in contrast to his inability to relate to others.

Meursault narrates the events that take place throughout his two-day ‘mourning’ period, during which he is content to light a cigarette and drink coffee in the presence of his late mother’s corpse. As he waits in the room described above, Meursault takes note of a

certain nurse who stood on the other side of the room: “I couldn’t see what she was doing. But the way her arms were moving made me think she was knitting. It was *pleasant*; the coffee had *warmed me up*, and the smell of flowers on the night air was coming through the open door. *I dozed off for a while*” (Camus 9). While in the same room as his mother’s corpse, which he had so reluctantly refused to view, Meursault expresses delight in a warm cup of coffee as he ponders the people around him.

Meursault’s word choice is notable in more ways than as an indication of his indifference to the death of his mother. The details he narrates reveal his lack of internalization of the event, and instead display his preoccupation with his immediate surroundings. The actual event of the funeral began as his mother’s friends made their way into the room. One by one, they entered to pay their final respects to their late friend, as Meursault closely examined their behavior and mannerisms. In his own words, the protagonist was so unfamiliar with all their grief and sorrow, that “for a second [he] had the ridiculous feeling that they were there to judge [him]” (Camus 10)—alluding to the fact that Meursault explains things only in reference to his own self. He describes the day’s end as follows,

I was tired. The caretaker took me to his room and I was able to clean up a little. I had some more coffee and milk, which was *very good*. When I went outside, the sun was up. Above the hills that separate Marengo from the sea, the sky was streaked with red. And the wind coming over the hills brought the smell of salt with it. *It was going to be a beautiful day*. It had been a long time since I’d been out in the country, and I could feel *how much I’d enjoy going for a walk if it hadn’t been for Maman*.

(Camus 12)

Thus, towards the end of the first chapter, the reader is able to develop a strong sense of Meursault's character.

On the very next day, Meursault returns to Algiers where he meets by the seaside with Marie Cardona, a former coworker of his. They go for a swim, after which they dress and go to watch a movie, at which point Marie notices Meursault's black tie. Unaware, she asks him if he is in mourning, and he informs her of his mother's death the day before. Note the order with which the events are narrated: when asked if he was in mourning, Meursault doesn't respond in the expected way by uttering a simple and obvious 'yes'. Instead, he simply states that the reason behind his choice of tie was the mere fact of his mother's death the day before, without saying that he is in mourning. In fact, Meursault even thinks of telling her that the death wasn't his fault, "but [he] stopped [himself] because [he] remembered that [he]'d already said that to [his] boss. It didn't mean anything. Besides, you always feel a little guilty" (Camus 20). But the conversation doesn't last much longer before the subject slips away, and both of them are at the movie theatre enjoying a good film.

Throughout the novel, Camus tells of an ordinary man who responds to the main events of his life complacently. Following his daytime spent with Marie, Meursault narrates a conversation, which took place between himself and his neighbor, Raymond, whom he had personally confessed to having heard beating his mistress. Meursault visits with Raymond and listens to him speak with disdain about both his mistress and her family, after which the two men take a stroll by the sea on a warm Algerian day. During their stroll, Raymond's mistress' brother appears with a group of his Algerian friends. Given the sensitivity of the situation, a fight almost breaks out between Raymond and the men, when Meursault interferes and takes Raymond's gun. Up to this point, no one had gotten hurt. Raymond then returns home and Meursault decides to clear his mind by returning to the beach for a second midday

stroll. And it is then and there that Camus sets the scene for the climax of his novel, which culminates in the murder of the Arab:

A minute later I turned back toward the beach and started walking. There was the same dazzling red glare. The sea gasped for air with each shallow, stifled little wave that broke on the sand. I was walking slowly toward the rocks and I could feel my forehead swelling under the sun. All that heat was pressing down on me and making it hard for me to go on. And every time I felt a blast of its hot breath strike my face, I gritted my teeth, clenched my fists, in my trouser pockets, and strained every nerve in order to overcome the sun and the thick drunkenness it was spilling over me...But as I got closer, I saw that Raymond's man had come back. (Camus 57)

Meursault's narration of his story's pivotal scene, as his narration of every other scene in the novel, strongly emphasizes the protagonist's surroundings. In this passage specifically, Meursault describes the extent to which the sun and heat caused him to suffer internally with every step that he took on the sand.

It was at the height of these reflections that Meursault catches a glimpse of the Arab, whom he recognizes from the conflict that had taken place earlier in the day. Recognizing Meursault as well, the Arab man naturally prepares himself for what he anticipates will be another fight as he pulls out a knife from his pocket in preparation for self-defense. Meursault's description of the murder scene once again underscores the theme of the blinding sun, pouring its rays upon him from afar:

That's when everything began to reel. The sea carried up a thick, fiery breath. It seemed to me as if the sky split open from

one end to the other to rain down fire. My whole being tensed and I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave; I felt the smooth underside of the butt; and there, in the noise sharp and deafening at the same time, is where it all started. I shook off the sweat and sun. I knew that I had shattered the harmony of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I'd been happy . . . . (Camus 59)

And so it happened just as Meursault narrated it: Camus's protagonist murdered the Arab and then shot at his motionless body four more times. The murder will soon lead to Meursault's imprisonment, prosecution and punishment.

Shortly after Meursault is placed in prison for having murdered a man, he is met with the Magistrate, who claims to have taken a particular interest in Meursault. The Magistrate contends that with a little cooperation from Meursault's side, God would help him. He learns that the death of Meursault's mother had taken place just a few short days before the murder. He tries to have a conversation with the convict in order to justify his otherwise uncalled-for actions. Rather than give the Magistrate the alibi he is looking for, Meursault denies any correlation between the murder and his personal loss, despite the fact that on the day of the murder he did indeed state that, "[t]he sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman" (Camus 58), inferring that his mother had indeed crossed his mind at the time of the murder. As he pictured the escape route for Meursault—thinking that it would appear reasonable to claim before the judges that Meursault acted the way that he did because he wasn't in his right frame of mind, due to the fact that he was in mourning over his mother—the Magistrate asks him whether or not he fired all five shots at once.

Not understanding the significance of the question, Meursault confesses to having paused between the first shot and the following four. Understandably, the magistrate asks

‘why’—why would a murderer fire four extra shots at an already-dead body? Meursault responds by repeating what he stated previously: “I said it just happened that way” (Camus 88). The magistrate continually asks Meursault if he loved his mother—surely to suggest that his violent behavior was caused by internal grief and a heightened love for the deceased. However, to these concerns, Meursault merely reflects, “. . . I answered that I had pretty much lost the habit of analyzing myself and that it was hard for me to tell him what he wanted to know. I *probably* did love Maman, but that didn’t mean anything.” Nonetheless, while Meursault looks within himself for an explanation that would satisfy the Magistrate, we are told that “. . .[his] nature was such that [his] physical needs often got in the way of [his] feelings” (Camus 65).

Reluctantly, the unsatisfied Magistrate proceeds to ask Meursault a crucial question regarding his religious faith. To Camus’s readers, the Magistrate seems to be looking for ways to argue that Meursault was a remorseful person who, out of the mourning for his mother, made a great mistake that was also wrong in the eyes of God. However, and to his second disappointment, Meursault informs the Magistrate that he does not believe in God. Even still, the Magistrate pulls out a crucifix and begins telling Meursault about how much Christ suffered for him by dying on the cross, to which Meursault coldly narrates, “As always, whenever I want to get rid of someone I’m not really listening to, I made it appear as if I agreed” (Camus 69). In trying to find agreement on these religious issues, the Magistrate wanted Meursault to know that there is no man too guilty to be forgiven. But when asked basically the same question a second time, disregarding the Magistrate’s effort to extend forgiveness, he claims that “To tell the truth, I had found it very hard to follow his reasoning, first because I was hot and there were big flies in his office that kept landing on my face, and also because he was scaring me a little. At the same time I knew that that was ridiculous because, after all, I was the criminal” (Camus 68).



Meursault was at no point oblivious of the social significance of the act he had committed. Being the wary character that he was, Meursault understood that the immediate implication of having taken another person's life was that one was a criminal. However, his own understanding of himself was still a question. In his frustration, the Magistrate says, "I have never seen a soul as hardened as yours. The criminals who have come before me have always wept at the sight of this image of suffering." Meursault then responds, but only in his own mind, "I was about to say that that was precisely because they were criminals. But then I realized that I was one too. It was an idea I couldn't get used to" (Camus 69-70). Indeed the protagonist understood social rules and expectations. However, he found himself at an internal crossroads when faced with the question of self-understanding: in his own mind, his act of murdering the Arab still did not make him a criminal. Nonetheless, the events of Camus's novel proceed as Meursault faces the judge and magistrate several more times, all to no avail. Meursault had confessed to killing the Arab; however, he was not sorry for his actions—merely annoyed (Camus 70). He was justified in pulling out the gun and shooting the man whose knife strongly reflected the sun in his eyes.

Finding himself enclosed within prison walls, Meursault contemplates the essence of his situation wherein he describes a gradual change in perspective, "When I was first imprisoned, the hardest thing was that my thoughts were still those of a free man" (Camus 76). His mind still wandered to where the women, cigarettes and blue skies were within reach. He missed his ability to attain any of the things he desired at any given time. Perhaps somewhat strangely, Marie was not the person he mainly desired to see, despite her being the woman to whom he was most committed: "I never thought specifically of Marie. But I thought so much about a woman, about women, about all the ones I had known, about all the circumstances in which I had enjoyed them, that my cell would be filled with their faces and crowded with my desires" (Camus 77). Earlier in the novel, Meursault had narrated a

conversation that took place with Marie in which she proposed marriage to him. He simply said that he agreed if she wished to do so, and then she asked him if he really loved her. He responded by saying that he probably did not really love her. “So why marry me, then?” she said. I explained to her that it didn’t really matter and that if she wanted to, we could get married. Besides, she was the one who was doing the asking and all I was saying was yes” (Camus 41-42). It comes as no surprise that when he is left to daydream on his own in the prison cell, he did not miss any one woman so much as women in the generality.

After having been imprisoned for a significant period of time, Meursault began losing track of all the things he had been holding onto when he was first locked in. He describes that even the days of the week no longer held any meaning in and of themselves, but that instead, weeks and months passed simply in relation to the two words ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’: “One day when the guard told me that I’d been in for five months, I believed it, but I didn’t understand it. For me it was one and the same unending day that was unfolding in my cell and the same thing I was trying to do” (Camus 80-81). Ultimately, Meursault’s imprisonment served to underline his sense of indifference and apathy to the events of his life. After all, none of it did mean anything—as he states repeatedly.

Prosecutions had been taking place for months on end when the primary subject in the courtroom shifted from Meursault’s actual crime to his personal beliefs. The convict found himself being psychoanalyzed, as he stood silent and perceptive. He found that he was essentially being convicted of being “a man without morals” (Camus 96) and for being an outsider. He was placed on the witness stand and interrogated for drinking a cup of coffee by his mother’s corpse: “Indeed, the gentlemen of the jury will take note of the fact. And they will conclude that a stranger may offer a cup of coffee, but that beside the body of the one who brought him into the world, a son *should have* refused it” (Camus 91). Moreover, Meursault was attacked for proceeding with his life normally upon his return to Algiers:

“Gentlemen of the jury, the day after his mother’s death, this man was out swimming, starting up a dubious liaison, and going to the movies, a comedy, for laughs. I have nothing further to say” (Camus 94).

But while he was being cross-examined, Meursault felt limited by his helplessness. He describes the proceedings in this way: “In a way, they seemed to be arguing the case as if it had nothing to do with me. Everything was happening without my participation. My fate was being decided without anyone so much as asking my opinion” (Camus 98). As far as he was concerned, ignoring the larger social context within which he was being scrutinized, Meursault was innocent. To him, nothing and no one really mattered. On the day of the murder, he felt that his actions were justified due to the heat and light of the sun. He had even offered this explanation to the Magistrate, reasoning that his environment overpowered his emotions. Nonetheless, he was eventually sentenced to death and execution sealed his fate.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist’s fate unfolds as he reflects upon the futility and meaninglessness of it all. The reader can identify the ways in which Meursault has made his peace with his social standing, as he reasons, “. . . I had no place in society whose most fundamental rules I ignored and that I could not appeal to the same human heart whose elementary response I knew nothing of” (Camus 102). He was a pariah and a social outcast whose decision to murder a man, and feel no remorse whatsoever for his actions, condemned him to death—a death that, as will be further explored, was essentially his own choice.

*The Stranger* is nothing short of a mystery. For years, people have come up with various interpretations of its deeper meanings. Suggestions have been provided regarding what Camus himself must have meant in writing this novel. However, while largely agreeing with the critical position of the highly esteemed French author, André Gide, Camus insisted that his own works essentially lose their artistic essence when they are read in terms of any one political, social or psychological mold (BBC World Book Club, Albert Camus—*The*

*Outsider*). Camus would have agreed with Gide in his explanation that his job as an artist was to “paint [a] picture well and light it properly” (*The Immoralist* xv). Nonetheless, we cannot but place Camus’s literary works in close contact with his own theories and philosophical ideas. For the purposes of this thesis, we consider Meursault as a rebel whose life can be understood as a statement in an absurd world—in Camus’s own definition of the two terms. Indeed, Camus’s foundational work, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, argues that everyman is indeed Sisyphus. Having been thrown into this world without any hope of ultimate meaning or resolution, we find ourselves caught in the mundane monotony of everyday routine—our own version of pushing of rock. When interrupted by consciousness, as our rock inevitably drops down again, we confront grand questions to which the world provides no answer. Camus’s theory of the absurd suggests that life may be meaningless and that no action or inaction can change this situation.

In view of this situation, Camus seems to envision two options. On the one hand, Camus suggests that suicide is the only reasonable option in the face of the inevitability and meaninglessness of every man’s end. If none of life’s endeavors lead to anything substantial, we may consider suicide as the one thing that is at least within man’s control. However, in choosing to live, we commit ourselves to finding meaning in another way. Camus suggests how this option might play itself out in the life of the solitary individual:

[W]e may propose to embark on some course of action which is not entirely gratuitous. In the latter case, in that we have no higher values to guide our behavior, our aim will be immediate efficiency. Since nothing is either true or false, good or bad, our guiding principle will be to demonstrate that we are the most efficient—in other words, the strongest. Then the world will no longer be divided into the just and the unjust, but into masters

and slaves. Thus, whichever way we turn, in our abyss of negation and nihilism, murder has its privileged position.

*(The Rebel 5)*

We might read this statement as an explanation for Meursault's murder of the Arab. Being a Frenchman in a French colony—namely, Algiers—Meursault may have perceived himself as a “master” in contrast to his Arab victim, perhaps even by ethnic affinity. Meursault's peace was disturbed by the Arab, whom he had recognized from earlier that day. Thus, if “immediate efficiency” is a legitimate motive for the rebel, then Meursault's doing away with the Arab has a kind of philosophical justification.

Meursault can be classified as an absurd protagonist. Camus's depiction of him is of one who is fundamentally indifferent towards the events that take place around him. The death of his mother has no emotional resonance to him. When asked by his mistress if he loves her, he fails to provide her with a definite answer, but agrees to marry her, if that is what she wants. He even presents his engagement as a mere reaction, as opposed to being something that issues from personal desire or conviction. In fact, when asked by Marie if he would have accepted such a proposal from any other woman, his response is striking: “Sure,” he claims; and again, “. . . none of it really mattered” (Camus 42). Furthermore, when his neighbor, the pimp, asks the protagonist to write him a malicious letter to lure his mistress to return, so that he could continue physically beating her for her infidelity, Meursault easily and thoughtlessly agrees. Given his physical capacity to write the letter, he finds no reason to deny the man his request: “I did it just as it came to me, but I tried my best to please Raymond because I didn't have any reason not to please him” (Camus 32). Not only does he agree to write Raymond the malicious letter, but he also agrees to be his pal, because Raymond “seemed set on it” (Camus 33). After he had committed the murder, Meursault refuses to give in to the pressures placed on him by the Magistrate and the Chaplain to show

remorse, or to plead to God. In other words, Meursault essentially rebels against society in a way that Camus has identified philosophically.

Furthermore, as well as being an absurdist whose actions stem largely from his indifference to the world, we may also perceive Meursault as being a kind of nihilist. The plot suggests that almost everyone in court was collaborating in an effort to find Meursault innocent. While one person offered the excuse of the protagonist's grief over his mother's death, still another thought to extricate him from the situation by claiming that even God was merciful enough to forgive him. But it is with Meursault's denial of these men's generosity that he is faced with the only remaining option regarding his fate: death by execution. It was in being conscious of this fate that he "opened [himself] to the gentle indifference of the world" (Camus 122). As the Chaplain walks in to try to convince him to change his plea one last time, Meursault comes to a pivotal realization,

. . . . I was sure about me, about everything . . . of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had . . . What did other people's deaths or a mother's love matter to me; what did [the Chaplain's] God or the lives people choose or the fate that they think they elect matter to me when we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also called themselves my brothers? . . . What would it matter if he were accused of murder and then executed because he didn't cry at his mother's funeral? (Camus 120-121)

In the face of the inevitability of the death to which society had condemned him, Meursault found himself acknowledging his now-confirmed indifference to the world—that at the end of the day, the 'how' or 'when' by which an individual would die was not what mattered; in fact,

that nothing mattered apart from the knowledge, in the end, every man would be “condemned” to death.

Such a powerful and constant indifference to the world is the very mark of nihilism, which essentially argues that if there is no God, there is no intrinsic meaning to human life. However, there is an intricate relationship between nihilism and the absurd, which helps us understand how Meursault can be classified as a rebel:

[Nietzsche] diagnosed in himself, and in others, the inability to believe and the disappearance of the primitive foundation of all faith—namely, the belief in life. The “can one live as a rebel” became with him “can one live believing in nothing?” His reply is affirmative. Yes, if one creates a system out of an absence of faith and if one accepts the final consequences of nihilism, and if, on emerging into the desert and putting one’s confidence in what is going to come, one feels, with the same primitive instinct, both pain and joy. (*The Rebel* 66)

According to Camus, the belief in nothing is a belief of sorts, and it is the basis upon which Meursault claims to hold fast to his plea, refusing all forms of help offered to him. Meursault denies all attempts to convince him of the existence of God; however, contrary to what nihilism seems to imply, Meursault’s atheism seems to stir within him a heightened sense of responsibility: “[f]or it is because ‘God is dead’ that human beings must assume responsibility for finding or formulating an answer to the question about the meaning of human existence . . . that human beings must make sense of their own lives by performing particular meaning-bestowing acts” (Heffernan 60-61). Meursault does indeed believe in the nothingness of the world. As a self-professed atheist who recognizes no purpose to any event in life, he rebels against a society that believes the contrary and that insists upon judging

every individual within this framework. Meursault's rebellion, therefore, expresses his innate convictions. He offers his life as an exhibit to life's absurdity—because there is no God for him, Meursault's assumes the responsibility to act to discover meaning on his own.

The question of ethics ultimately arises within the philosophical framework of *The Stranger* as a work of literature. Throughout the novel, Meursault appears to be holding onto his viewpoint rather stubbornly; and while he doesn't appear to have any personal viewpoints on the events that take place around him, he nonetheless maintains his indifference towards them. It is this steadfastness that enables the critical reader to see that the protagonist must have had some sense of right and wrong, given the fact that when faced with questions regarding his own self and fate, he always refused the ideals that did not convince him—which contradicts his otherwise complacent demeanor throughout the novel. However, if he claims that there is no God, where, then, does Meursault get this sense of ethics when placed at the most important crossroads of his life? Why didn't he simply give in to the many routes of escape presented to him by the many men of supposed authority at the time of his trial? Again, one must remember Camus's answer to this question, which insists that a rebel's sense of right and wrong must derive from an inner personal conviction.

Throughout Part One of the novel, Meursault comes across to his audience as an unreflective and indifferent character. He does not appear to subscribe to any one code of ethics or moral foundation. Instead, we might identify the ways by which the protagonist simply acts according to his current state of mind, without being motivated by any underlying catalyst. It is throughout Part Two of the novel, however, that we are able to identify a significant shift in the character's detriment, “. . . Meursault in prison undergoes a metamorphosis (but not a 'conversion', for that word would have inapplicable religious connotations) that enables him to see and feel people and things . . . that he had not been able to see and feel in Part One” (Heffernan 67). While he appears to be indifferent and



unreflective throughout Part One, Meursault later reveals a more contemplative side to his character when he considers himself in the broader context, so to speak. Meursault is a rebel, as far as Camus's definition of rebellion is concerned. However, what is the protagonist necessarily rebelling against? In answering this question, we would also be discovering what Meursault contemplates in the second half of his narration.

The trial that took place after the murder quickly took a turn. Rather than centering around the fact that Meursault had murdered a man, it became a conversation about the protagonist's responses to the events of his personal life: "But my lawyer had lost his patience, and, raising his hands so high that his sleeves fell, revealing the creases of a starched shirt, he shouted, 'Come now, is my client on trial for burying his mother or for killing a man?'" (Camus 96). Meursault was essentially being judged for being an immoral man, an antichrist, all for speaking a truth that disagreed with the consensual views on life. Meursault murdered a man because, under the circumstances, the sun was in his eyes and was caused him a great deal of discomfort. The justifiable thing for Meursault to do at the time was to retrieve Raymond's gun from his pocket and shoot the Arab. In Meursault's world of "immediate efficiency" as well as heightened sensitivity to the surrounding environment, the protagonist was internally compelled to act the way that he did, and for that, he was not remotely sorry. Needless to point out, however, Meursault is a literary individual who exists within a larger picture, which encompasses more individuals than himself. In the context of this grander picture, Meursault finds himself a pariah and a recluse.

The specific society against which Meursault is contrasted is a Christian one. All of its members believe in God comply by Christian practices and assume that society is based on religious foundations. By the time Meursault was imprisoned, he had already reflected upon this society and had maintained: "All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice, seeing if there's any way out of the inevitable" (*The Stranger* 108). His usage of the

word “machinery” implies that, in his opinion, society is based on a mere sense of routine, rather than on personal According to the Bible—taken as society’s code of ethics—“thou shalt not kill” means that the individual does not have the right to take the life of another man in the course of an average day. And if, in an act of incoherence, one man does commit such a crime, the law-breaker is expected to admit to his crime, as well as provide society with some form of excuse as to why he did such an unspeakable thing. In the case of Meursault, no agreed-upon code of ethics existed. He merely relied on his innate sense of obligation and momentary judgment to act as he did.

In an interview, *Bowen’s Basement*, Camus presents various comments on the idea of the absurd and explains that Meursault, at least to some degree, expresses his own point of view on this topic: “Meursault, who represents my own beliefs about the Absurd, rejects the Magistrate’s beliefs that conversion to religion is the only way for Meursault to save himself” (*Bowen’s Basement* 3). At the same time, using the novel as an example, we might come to believe that there essentially is no room for the absurd position in mainstream society, seeing as how the majority will attempt to inflict their own beliefs on the individual man. It is mainly for this reason that Meursault can be considered an outside/stranger. Despite having grown up within the context of the whole—a whole whose every endeavor is based on one code of conduct—Meursault lives his life differently.

That being said, Meursault found himself at a crossroads: he must either complacently submit to society’s rules and pressures and thus save his life by avoiding the death penalty, or hold fast to his objection to the norm, costing him his life. Meursault chooses the latter and ends up getting locked in a prison cell and awaiting the end. Indeed, it was in his clash with the collective that Meursault’s individuality was denied, despite the fact that, according to his personal convictions, he was obeying a different set of rules that defined right and wrong against the values of the Christian majority. Therefore, despite the fact that Meursault is

condemned by the judge and jury for being unethical, a critical reader finds that the trial does not resolve the question of ethics or morals after all.

From the perspective of a society that agrees to a definition of right and wrong, and whose individuals act out of an obedience to such rules and frameworks, Camus's Meursault would appear to be an indifferent character. Believing that life is not worth the trouble of having lived it, Meursault suggests a marriage between absurdism and nihilism in that he denounces the existence of God, perceiving all of life as being one and the same, altogether unnecessary and futile, and takes no action towards maintaining uniformity in his own life. Meursault presents the events of his life as being separate and completely unrelated. The randomness of this display of events underscores the protagonist's wandering attitude, which ultimately encourages him to take no particular stance until the period of his imprisonment and trial. In the unraveling of Camus's Part Two, we can observe a characteristic attitude of rebellion, albeit the meaninglessness of Meursault's life. In identifying Meursault's stubbornness as rebellion, we need to revisit Camus's view of absurd murder:

. . . the concept of the absurd leads only to a contradiction as far as the problem of murder is concerned. Awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference, to say the least, and hence possible. If we believe in nothing, and if nothing has any meaning and if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible and nothing has any importance. There is no pro or con: the murderer is neither right nor wrong. We are free to stoke the crematory fires or to devote ourselves to the care of lepers. Evil and virtue are mere chance or caprice.

*(The Rebel 5)*

Thus, in murdering the Arab, Meursault wasn't necessarily making anything of it, other than the fact that at this moment, his choice to kill the Arab was simply convenient. Human life, to the absurdist protagonist, was insignificant; therefore, whether one continued to live beyond a specific time was a matter of pure chance. Thus, one man's argument that the killing of the Arab was an act of rebellion is dismissed, seeing how murder bore no significance in the grander scheme of things.

In what way, then, can Meursault be perceived as a rebel? In answering this question, one must consider the characteristics of a Camusan rebel: "As a last resort, he is willing to accept the final defeat, which is death, rather than be deprived of the personal sacrament that he would call, for example, freedom. Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees" (*The Rebel* 15). In other words, Camus believed that in being thoroughly committed to his freedom, the rebel should be willing to die in defending it.

At the moment of his awakening, Meursault discovered his disdain for the system. Regardless of the pressures that were placed on him to confess to the existence of God, or to relate the death of his mother to his act of murdering the Arab, Meursault maintained his perspective—that the events of his life were completely unrelated, believing that what happens occurs at random, and that no God existed, whose forgiveness would do away with the protagonist's punishment. Returning to the original hypothesis, which would compare Meursault to Sisyphus, we may consider the moment when his execution becomes a final decision as what provides the protagonist with a window of consciousness enabling him to truly understand the meaning of death in light of the absurd. The rock has fallen down the hill, but Meursault considers himself to be happy: "Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again. For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only one wish that there be a large crowd of

spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate” (Camus 122-123).

Such was the degree of peace that the protagonist had found. He desired to be surrounded by crowds of the collective, whose ‘norm’ condemned him as an unethical outcast. For to Meursault, death in this way was more than a mere rebellion: it was the defining event of his entire life. Meursault is portrayed as an outsider to the society to which he is expected to conform. Due to his steadfast embrace of the Absurd, society controls and decides his fate. However, in light of how the protagonist’s actions are depicted, we might say that Meursault himself was the agent of his own fate in his refusal to compromise his attitude towards life. The protagonist offers a reflective statement that underlines his rebellion and substantiates his belief in the haphazardness and insignificance of the events of every man’s existence:

The fact that the sentence had been read at eight o’clock at night and not at five o’clock, the fact that it could have been an entirely different one, the fact that it had been decided by men who change their underwear, the fact that it had been handed down in the name of some vague notion called the French (or German or Chinese) people—all of it seemed to detract from the seriousness of the decision. *(The Stranger 109)*

Even the event of Meursault’s death was gratuitously orchestrated, reassuring him of his decision to rebel against the whole and present his own life as testimony to life’s absurdity.

## Chapter Two: *The Plague* and Political Rebellion

“The language [Rieux] used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in—though he had much liking to his fellow men—and had resolved, for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.” (The Plague 12)

Author and thinker, Albert Camus, produced his work with the firm belief in the autonomy of Art—that the only purpose his work should serve is itself; however, working within the gruesome and pressing conditions of the Second World War, Camus was strongly influenced by the things he was exposed to. Being the philosopher that he was and having already established a theory through which he was able to convey a new and powerful way of thinking (that is to say, his theory of the Absurd), he produced what is perhaps his most lyrical and aesthetically moving work of fiction, *The Plague*. The novel was published in 1948, shortly after the author published *The Stranger*, and has since been interpreted in a multitude of ways. The lens through which the novel has been read most widely is that which assumes that the plague as an allegory for the Second World War and the Occupation. Presenting the plague as an external and inhuman entity that is hostile to the human individual, one may indeed see how Camus’s work may be read in this way. Another reading of *The Plague* suggests that the novel applies Camus’s theory of the Absurd to communicate the futility and impermanence of human life. Finding themselves within the inevitable reality of eventual death, the characters in *The Plague* question the meaning of their lives as they stand to lose them just as meaninglessly as the rats of Oran lose theirs.

Camus’s *The Plague* is certainly a representation of something grander than a mere physical plague upon the city of Oran. And it is by reading the novel as an allegory of the Nazi Occupation of France and Algeria during the Second World War, and also as a study of life’s absurdity in general that we can identify the ways by which Camus utilizes the main characters as symbols of rebellion against totalitarian political regimes and the inevitability of death. Throughout the novel, the characters are neither complacent to the status quo, nor do

they surrender to life's meaninglessness. Rather, their struggle against the inevitable marks their humanity and is the essence of their lives. Rebellion, then, becomes the purpose of an incarcerated life. By zooming in on some of Camus's protagonists, we should come to better understand his theory of the Absurd and his vision of human nobility.

The narrator opens the novel by describing the mundane Algerian city of Oran. He describes the bourgeois nature of both the city and its people. Each day in Oran is said to so closely resemble the day before that only rarely does anything noteworthy take place:

Such being the normal life of Oran, it will be easily understood that our fellow citizens had not the faintest reason to apprehend the incidents that took place in the Spring of the year in question and were (as we subsequently realized) premonitory signs of the grave events we are to chronicle. To some, these events will seem quite natural; to others, all but incredible. But, obviously, a narrator cannot take account of these differences of outlook. His business is only to say: 'This is what happened', when he knows that it actually did happen, that it closely affected the life of a whole populace, and that there are thousands of eyewitnesses who can appraise in their hearts the truth of what he writes. (*The Plague* 6)

Although the narrator of Camus's novel remains undisclosed until its final segment, the audience is immediately advised to trust his narration as unbiased and reflective of the factual events that actually occurred.

Camus sets the scene for the events that follow as he embeds the preliminary indications of the plague into the monotony of Oranian life. As the people of the town went about their lives as normal, rats began to appear dead on the streets and outside of sewers.

One after the other, they would appear, and then increase as they were recorded in tens, and eventually in hundreds. As the situation was no longer deniable, the people of the town began raising havoc against the government for not taking action. A hotel manager, for example, complains irritably to the narrator, saying, “Are our city fathers aware that the decaying bodies of these rodents constitute a grave danger to the population?” (Camus 28). But the narrator’s response to the hotel manager’s fury functions as the basis for a subtext that recurs throughout the narrative: “But he has a personal grievance, too; that dead rats should be found in the elevator of a three-star hotel seems to him the end of all things. To console him, I said: ‘But, you know, everybody’s in the same boat’. ‘That’s just it’, he replied. ‘Now we’re like everybody else’” (Camus 28). The initial human reaction was for the individual to internalize the surrounding events as they apply to himself alone. What is subliminally suggested, from the opening of the novel, is that the plague has a collective significance, just as it addresses the individual.

The rat epidemic wanes only to make way for dire human illness. Dr. Rieux and his friend Castel take heed of the illnesses followed by deaths that take place around them, and, as well as tending to the patients’ physical needs, begin approaching the authorities with the magnitude of the problem. Urging those in charge to take action, Rieux and Castel speak up to no avail, and are instead advised to keep quiet about the situation rather than call it as they see it, “For rats died in the street; men in their homes. And newspapers are concerned only with the street” (Camus 35). As the plague appeared, the government and news agencies were diverting the public’s attention in an effort to keep the panic at bay. All the while, the signs and symptoms that Rieux discovered needed to be treated immediately:

Obviously the abscesses had to be lanced. Two crisscross strokes, and the ganglion disgorged a mixture of blood and pus.

Their limbs stretched out as far as they could manage, the sick



men went on bleeding. Dark patches appeared on their legs and stomachs; sometimes a ganglion would stop suppurating, then suddenly swell again. Usually the sick men died, in a stench of corruption. (Camus 35)

As distraught as he was, Dr. Rieux met with his esteemed colleague, Castel, to discuss the magnitude and meaning of the rising death tolls. Throughout their conversation, Castel speaks the unspeakable, admitting that what was taking place around them was, indeed, a plague. As the postmortem reports flooded Rieux's office one after the other, he could no longer disagree with Castel's explanation of the epidemic: "[H]is reaction was the same as that of the great majority of our townsfolk. Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise" (Camus 36-37).

Within the Oranian context, nothing out of the ordinary could be imagined as taking place in the town, to say nothing of an actual plague. While Rieux slowly but surely adjusted his mind to what was actually taking place, the general public went about life as normal, going to the cinema on lazy afternoon days and enjoying a good laugh while their neighbors suffered and died. It wasn't until Rieux received a visit from Grand, a clerk in the municipal office, and Cottard, his mysterious neighbor, that the reality of the matter became clear to him. Grand handed Rieux a report with the latest death tolls he had received, while gazing at the contents with a frown, and said, "Well . . . perhaps we'd better make up our minds to call this disease by its name. So far we've been only shilly-shallying" (Camus 42). It was this admission that finally set Rieux off to the laboratory to seek a cure.

Grand is certainly one of the characters in Camus's *The Plague* who exemplifies this idea of Oranian bourgeois monotony and lack of ambition. Introduced as an elderly simple

and humble man, he was promised a promotion earlier in his career but never received it. Rather than demanding what others would consider his right, Grand worked the same job for years at the same pace, even forgetting the promise that was made to him years ago: “And here lies Grand’s originality, or anyhow an indication of it. He could certainly have brought to official notice, if not his rights—of which he wasn’t sure—at least the promise given him . . . Grand no longer remembered their exact terms . . . this was the real trouble—Joseph Grand couldn’t find his words” (Camus 45). Grand is notable for his recognition of the importance of self-expression. His ultimate goal is to write a book; however, in his pursuit of perfection and frustration of word choice, he never gets around to it, believing that the words are bound to come eventually: “What I really want, Doctor, is this. On the day when the manuscript reaches the publisher, I want him to stand up—after he’s read it through, of course—and say to his staff: ‘Gentlemen, hats off!’” (Camus 102). Rieux took a great liking to Grand, seeing him as a humble and genuine soul whose ambitions didn’t exceed his humble ability to fulfill his duties. Rieux’s particular fondness of Grand made it even harder for him to accept what this decent man had to endure: “He realized how absurd it was, but he simply couldn’t believe that a pestilence on the great scale could befall a town where people like Grand were to be found, obscure functionaries cultivating harmless eccentricities.” (Camus 46-47).

Grand is not the only character in whom Rieux takes a particular liking. Cottard is also presented as an intriguing character. Not only is he Grand’s neighbor; Cottard is said to have committed an undisclosed crime in the past, for which reason he now avoids anything having to do with government affairs. On their way to the laboratory, Grand returns to his municipal office while Cottard swiftly escapes the scene. But despite being absent from the official scene, Cottard appears to be the only happy citizen at the time of the plague. As the events of the novel unfold, Cottard gains a peculiar confidence and security:

. . . Cottard was a silent, secretive man, with something about

him that made Grand think of a wild boar. His bedroom, meals at a cheap restaurant, some rather mysterious comings and goings—these were the sum of Cottard’s days . . . [and] in this connection Grand mentioned in a detail he had noticed—that . . . the thing that struck him most about the man was his aloofness, not to say his mistrust of everyone he met. And now, so Grand said, there had been a complete change. (Camus 53)

The plague is officially recognized for what it is when the authorities and government officials finally lock down Oran and a sense of community develops as the people come to terms with their vulnerability before the plague:

. . . . once the town gates were shut, every one of us realized that all, the narrator included, were, so to speak, in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new conditions of life. Thus, for example, a feeling normally as individual as the ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and—together with fear—the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead. (Camus 57)

As well as striking citizens dead at an intimidating pace, the plague makes itself known as no respecter of persons, which forced people to step out of their individual lives and acquire a more collective outlook. Overnight, “words like ‘special arrangements’, ‘favor’, and ‘priority’ had lost all meaning” (Camus 68). The state of siege was placed on everyone equally, and no individual alibi could exempt a person from being a “prisoner of the plague” (Camus 70).

Perhaps the greatest example of this lost sense of individuality is in the character of Raymond Rambert. Rambert is a journalist from Paris who was in Oran for work-related research when the plague broke out and the entire town was placed under a state of siege. Having a lover back home, Rambert found himself in distress at the thought of his being trapped outside of Paris and away from his loved one. Having been able to speak to a government official, “[h]e had explained that his presence in Oran was purely accidental, he had no connection with the town and no reasons for staying in it; that being so, he surely was entitled to leave, even if, once outside the town, he had to undergo a spell of quarantine”. Unfortunately for him, however, the official’s response was that he greatly appreciated his stance, but that “no exceptions could be made” (Camus 84).

In his helplessness, and as a final resort, the journalist meets Rieux in an anxious plea for a certificate to prove that he had not contracted the plague, hoping that the document would convince the government official to let him go. However, after listening intently to the journalist’s story, Rieux presents him with the unfortunate news that, even with a doctor’s note, the government official would not be able to let him go since “there are thousands of people placed as you are in this town, and there can’t be any question of allowing them to leave it”. Illuminating the unlucky fact that Rambert, in the singularity of his situation, is actually not very singular at all, Rieux admits the absurdity of the debacle, but asserts that all men are ultimately in the same situation: “Unfortunately, from now on you’ll belong here, like everybody else” (Camus 86). And so the Parisian journalist finds himself a prisoner of his profession, rather than a lover of his soul mate, and “[Rieux] was enabled to follow, and on a different plane, the dreary struggle in progress between each man’s happiness and the abstractions of the plague” (Camus 91).

However, this concept of the collective seems to have had a somewhat different meaning for Father Paneloux.. Paneloux was a Jesuit priest living in Oran, who gave a

disturbing sermon at the official public announcement of the plague. The sermon took place on a Sunday morning, and an unusually large number of attendees were present—for on Sunday morning, the average Oranian citizen was more likely to be found sunbathing than in Church (Camus 93). At this specific time in history, however, people “were waiting for a turn of events. With regard to religion—as to many other problems—plague had induced in them a curious frame of mind, as remote from indifference as from fervor; the best name to give it, perhaps, might be ‘objectivity’” (Camus 93). Thus, the people gather in Church with an attentive ear to the words about to be spoken from the holy podium, when all of a sudden, they are dumbstruck by the opening words of Father Paneloux’s sermon: “Calamity has come upon you, my brethren, and my brethren, you deserve it” (Camus 94). Exempting himself from the Oranian community, Father Paneloux likens the plague to that which took place in the book of Exodus, when the Egyptians displeased God by refusing to let the Israelites go. The sermon continued, in a prominently accusatory tone, wherein Paneloux spoke:

No earthly power, nay, not even—mark me well—the vaunted might of human science can avail you to avert that hand once it is stretched toward you . . . Now you are learning your lesson, the lesson that was learned by Cain and his offspring, by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, by Job and Pharaoh, by all that hardened their hearts against Him. And like them you have been beholding mankind and all creation with new eyes, since the gates of this city closed on you and on the pestilence. (Camus 95-97).

Just as significant as the sermon were the reactions of those who listened. Although not all Oranians reacted in the same way, many were on their knees by the end of Father Paneloux’s

address. And still, “[t]o some, the sermon simply brought home the fact that they had been sentenced, for an unknown crime, to an indeterminate period of punishment” (Camus 100).

Throughout Paneloux’s address to an Oranian people in distress, the priest’s tone was distant to the average citizen’s suffering. Indeed, he spoke from an aloof podium at a helpless and confused congregation, using the predominant pronoun “you” throughout. Many of the people felt that the cleric spoke directly from God—and that he was able to convey the idea that is the sins of the entire community were all-encompassing and indifferent to individual or singular circumstances. Ultimately, the abstraction that Rieux discussed earlier with Rambert became insignificant in the light of the cleric’s stance on the plague.

Needless to say, Father Paneloux’s congregational address brought no consolation to the public as Dr. Rieux, joined by a few comrades, continued in a joint effort to face the human repercussions of the epidemic. But despite their best efforts to inject hope into a withering and dying society, people were becoming increasingly calloused and desensitized:

At first, when [groans were heard], people often gathered outside and listened, prompted by curiosity or compassion. But under the prolonged strain it seemed that hearts had toughened; people lived beside those groans or walked past them as though they had become the normal speech of men.

(Camus 111)

What was once known as an uneventful and mundane town had become a very different place, and the town dwellers were growing accustomed to a new definition of normalcy—except now, “Plague had killed all colors, vetoed pleasure” (Camus 113). But in the midst of the disheartening state of the Oranians, philosophical observations and analyses begin to illuminate the metaphysical meaning behind the daily disasters.

Jean Tarrou was on vacation in Oran when he, like Rambert, was forced into quarantine. Being an outsider documenting the chronicles of the plague and having a different perspective on the situation, Tarrou was able to observe some small but significant details, such as the fact that the media went from reporting the weekly deaths to now reporting the daily toll: “The newspapers and the authorities are playing ball with the plague. They fancy they’re scoring off it because a hundred and thirty is a smaller figure than nine hundred and ten” (Camus 113). In a conversation with Tarrou, the manager of the hotel in which he was staying compared the plague to a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, for example. He only wished that what had befallen Oran was nothing more than an earthquake, after the sudden impact of which one would know whether he was alive or dead and would be able to respond in practical ways. With the plague, however, even those who hadn’t contracted the disease were unable to think of anything else (Camus 115). Despite the fact that, in any event, some citizens could have made it through the plague alive, their minds and souls were bound to be impacted. But it is Tarrou’s comments on Father Paneloux’s sermon that seem to be most pertinent to the problem at hand:

I can understand that type of fervor and find it not displeasing. At the beginning of a pestilence and when it ends, there’s always a propensity for rhetoric. In the first case, habits have not yet been lost; in the second, they’re returning. It is in the thick of a calamity that one gets hardened to the truth—in other words, to silence. So let’s wait. (Camus 116)

Indeed, Father Paneloux’s sermon had taken place when the plague was first called by its name. When all the average citizen could see was that lives were being taken by surprise,

people needed rationalization—rhetoric, as Tarrou referred to it—even if a certain kind of rhetoric did nothing to help people to cope with the calamity.

The plague had been going on for too long and had taken too many lives for the people to still be worrying about what Father Paneloux had said, but it is this mixture of wisdom and philosophy that allows Tarrou to stand out. Being an outsider, his perspective was wider than that of the fully invested Oranian citizen. Thanks to his perspective, Tarrou was able to maintain a level of calm throughout the plague, fueled by his resilient ability to identify the good in people, no matter the circumstances: “Tarrou also records that he had a long talk with Dr. Rieux; all he remembered was that it had ‘good results’. In this connection he notes the color of Mme. Rieux’s, the doctor’s mother’s, eyes, a limpid brown, and makes the odd observation that a gaze revealing so much goodness of heart would always trump over plague” (Camus 116). We might argue that Camus incorporated the character of Tarrou into an apparently pessimistic novel to embody the optimism to which the author so steadfastly adhered—as is evident from his other works as well.

As the government exerts efforts to create serums and vaccinations to cure people of the plague, a crucial conversation takes place between Rieux and Tarrou. While considering the ‘official’ efforts being exerted by the officials, the two men consider combating the plague by joining forces and visiting the patients themselves. However, being educated individuals, the two men are not oblivious to the risks and implications at hand. Doctor Rieux explains: “I have no idea what’s awaiting me, or what will happen when all this ends. For the moment I know this; there are sick people and they need curing. Later on, perhaps, they’ll think things over; and so shall I. But what’s wanted now is to make them well. I defend them as best I can, that’s all” (Camus 127). The two men agree in their purpose to act in whatever way might prove beneficial—regardless of the risks they themselves may face.



But in their discussion on these risks, the conversation leads to concerns that are more philosophically challenging. The conversation soon shifts to the two men's philosophies of life and to whether or not they believe in the existence of God. What becomes apparent through their dialogue is that neither Rieux nor Tarrou believe in the existence of God; however, with that pivotal fact established, the men consider the purpose of living a life over which God is no longer in control. At this moment in their conversation, an invincible optimism emerges as a counter to the dire situation at hand:

What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves. All the same, when you see the misery it brings, you need to be a madman, or a coward, or stone blind, to give in tamely to the plague . . . The evil in the world always comes from ignorance and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more good than bad. (Camus 125, 126, 131)

Despite the fact that both men had come into direct contact with the victims of the plague, they could not deny the inherent goodness and nobility of human existence.

All the while, and after having arrived at common ground, Tarrou and Rieux went about trying to recruit individuals who would be willing to join them in combatting the plague. Upon approaching Cottard, they found him to be reluctant to help: "It's not my job", he said. Then, with an air of bravado, he added: "What's more, the plague suits me quite well and I see no reason why I should bother about trying to stop it" (Camus 158). Upon hearing these words, Tarrou and Rieux are reminded of Cottard's arrest for an undisclosed crime—which, however, was no longer of any interest to the police. Thanks to the pestilence, he had regained his freedom to roam the streets in confidence, managing to eek out a living from

smuggling goods and products past siege walls. In fact, one of the tasks Cottard had taken upon himself was to find Rambert a way back to Paris, where he could be reunited with his lover. However, despite Cottard's success in arranging for Rambert to meet with a smuggler, Rambert declines his offer at the very last minute. In a conversation between himself, Tarrou, and Rieux, the men discuss the reasons for which they would be willing to die.

Throughout their conversation, Rambert seems irritated by what he believed to be a fact—that Tarrou and Rieux were unable to sympathize with his desperate desire to escape Oran. As far as he was concerned, love was the greatest reason for which he would be willing to risk his life, so much so that he had already communicated with Cottard's smuggler friend who had set an escape plan for him to follow. As far as he was concerned, he did not believe that the other two men could ever possibly understand what it is like to be so separated and isolated from one's love. Finally, Tarrou spoke up on Rieux's behalf: "I suppose you don't know that Rieux's wife is in a sanatorium, a hundred miles or so away" (Camus 163). Indeed, the doctor who had made it his life's mission to save lives was willing to sacrifice his own life and even to forego love while doing so. It was such a realization that convicted Rambert to join forces in working to combat the plague.

The town of Oran by mid-summer no longer allowed for individual convictions or acts but "only one collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all" (Camus 167). Oran had officially gone full circle, but Rambert still had the option of escaping with the smugglers, Marcel and Louis, at some undetermined moment. After having dreamed of nothing less than a full reunion with his loved one, Rambert now stood on the edge of freedom and could imagine his future happiness. There he was, a healthy individual who had spent the last couple of weeks observing the illness and pain of the townspeople. And then, all of a sudden, he saw the shame involved in his leaving the Oranian people behind with Tarrou and Rieux left to combat the pestilence on their own: "Showing more animation, Rieux told

him that was sheer nonsense; there was nothing shameful in preferring happiness. ‘Certainly’, Rambert replied. ‘But it may be shameful to be happy by oneself’” (Camus 209). Thus Rambert’s humanity shone through at the critical moment when he came to understand how his own happiness was bound to the happiness of others.

While no individual was special enough to be exempt from the threat of the plague, there was one person who catalyzed a major shift in the novel’s perspective. Mr. Othon’s son was struck by the plague. While the young boy’s family members were sent into isolation to be monitored and kept under quarantine, Dr. Rieux, Grand, Tarrou, and Father Paneloux stayed with the boy through his suffering. The men stood helplessly for hours as the boy wailed and shrieked in agony, appearing to be putting up a fight against the death that seemed inevitable. In view of the inevitable, the boy’s resilient struggle was sure to mean that he would suffer longer. Sadness filled the room as Father Paneloux prayed that the young boy might die in peace: “[The men] had already seen children die—for many months now death had shown no favoritism—but they had never yet watched a child’s agony minute by minute, as they had now been doing since daybreak” (Camus 214). Surely, the young boy’s suffering provoked in each man the strong emotions of rage and discontent for the helplessness they faced, but the boy’s eventual death also kindled a sense of unity among them. When the boy’s fight was lost, a conversation between Rieux and Paneloux enabled them to set their theological differences aside and agree to become coworkers in seeking one and the same goal—mankind’s health and wellbeing (Camus 219); for they united in rage against the absurdity that such a pestilence should take the life of an innocent young boy.

Shortly after this event, Father Paneloux was scheduled to give another address to the Oranian people. Being well aware of their disapproving reception of his first sermon, Paneloux understood the need to personally extend an invitation to Rieux, if he was to have him attend. And indeed he did attend and as the second sermon commenced, a significant

difference could be detected so that “that instead of saying ‘you’ he now said ‘we’” (Camus 222). In considering himself one of the Oranian people, Paneloux proceeded with more humanity in his congregational address:

For while it is right that a libertine should be struck down, we see no reason for a child’s suffering. And, truth to tell, nothing was more important on earth than a child’s suffering, the horror it inspires in us, and the reasons we must find to account for it . . . Indeed, we were all up against the wall that plague had built around us, and in its lethal shadow we must work out our salvation. (Camus 223-224)

Thus, the war had driven even the representative of religion towards a position of community and equality, within which all that mattered was the essence of humanity itself.

The plague continues for the remainder of the book, when Tarrou is struck and killed, just as all the others. At the conclusion of the novel, the audience discovers that the narrator was Dr. Rieux himself, who, at the lifting of the quarantine walls, makes the following two claims—first, “that there are more things to admire about men than to despise”, and second, “that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good” but has an uncertain future:

. . . . that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (Camus 308)

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Camus's novel, *The Plague*, may be read and analyzed as a representation of various things. The author himself claimed the following, "I want to express through the medium of the plague the suffocation from which we have all suffered and the atmosphere of menace and exile with which we have all lived. I want at the same time to extend this interpretation to the notion of existence in general. The plague will give the image of those in this war who have had the part of reflection, of silence and that of moral suffering" (qtd in. Sharpe 61).

We may interpret the plague as symbolic of both a totalitarian regime and of existence in general, but the author's distinction between 'rebellion' and 'revolution' throughout the philosophical work, *The Rebel*, provides the lens through which the novel can be read. According to Camus, a revolutionary is someone who is dissatisfied with the world in which he lives. He recognizes the areas in which improvement needs to be made and therefore speaks against the established regime. Such a person, upon reading a novel, for example, expects a clear-cut conclusion at the end—a definite close to the circle of disdain. However, the revolutionary sacrifices creativity to an overarching system that offers a model for some future society. By means of argument and upheaval, the revolutionary turns away from the passionate side of his nature and sets up goals that do not allow him to retain a sense of the impossible. On the other hand, Camus contrasts the revolutionary with the rebel—as an individual who, unlike the revolutionary, accepts his being-in-this-world, while also recognizing 'this world' as an unsatisfactory place. Rather than merely offering criticism or a blueprint for action, the rebel works creatively towards a solution while remaining in touch with existence itself. Rebellion, however, is not without its complications:

The sudden appearance of the concept of "All or Nothing" demonstrates that rebellion, contrary to current opinion, and though it springs from everything that is most strictly individualistic in man, questions the very idea of the

individual. If the individual, in fact, accepts death and happens to die as a consequence of his act of rebellion, he demonstrates by doing so that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of a common good which he considers more important than his own destiny. If he prefers the risk of death to the negation of the rights that he defends, it is because he considers these rights more important than himself. *(The Rebel 15-16)*

Indeed, throughout *The Plague*, one may clearly identify the ways by which Camus presents his audience with characters who embody rebellion. Their strongest purpose is to combat the plague, instead of complacently accepting it as destiny. A ruthless and indiscriminate plague breaks out in Oran, threatening to end the lives of everyone. Despite the fact that certain characters (Rambert, as the clearest example) exert the most extreme of efforts to be the exception, no man is exempt from the danger at hand. Rieux, Grand, Tarrou, and eventually even Rambert himself, make the noble decision to continue treating the patients of the plague, even if it means risking their own lives:

Many fledging moralists in those days were going about our town proclaiming there was nothing to be done about it and we should bow to the inevitable. And Tarrou, Rieux, and their friends might give one answer or another, but its conclusion was always the same, their certitude that a fight must be put up, in this way or that, and there must be no bowing down . . . And to do this there was only one resource: to fight the plague. There was nothing admirable about this attitude; it was merely logical. (Camus 132, 133)

As the months went by, the plague proves to be a matter of fact—the ‘world’ in which Camus’s characters lived. Their authenticity and inherent vocation as rebels allowed them to accept their being-in-this-world at such a time and in such a place as they were living, to go against the given matter of fact.

The plague, described by Rambert as an abstraction, may either be interpreted as the war and totalitarian regime that went along with the Occupation or as life itself (Camus 88-89). But before one delves into the exploration of either, the idea of the individual versus the whole must be pivotally diagnosed. The plague is not more likely to strike one person more than the other; all men are privy to its dire sting. Even still, Camus presents his rebellious characters as individuals who work within a social framework. Camus presents his protagonists to underscore their personal and singular lives, but also their membership in the Oranian community. Each of the characters is presented as being a complete and well-rounded individual, who, as well as fighting the plague, has issues and concerns of his own. Camus’s insistence on providing his audience with as many mini-plots as the characters are numbered is of considerable significance. The author in this way emphasizes the humanity of individuals. even within the collective.

Camus displays his concern for the individual’s authenticity through the narrator’s wide acceptance of characters—even those with whom he fundamentally disagrees. Throughout his conversations with Rambert, Dr. Rieux encourages him to be happy and to pursue a means of escape to Paris. Rather than judge Rambert for bailing on the suffering people of Oran, Rieux humbly appreciates Rambert’s quest for personal happiness. In his resilient optimism, Rieux believes in the inherent goodness of life, and according to Camus’s reasoning throughout *The Rebel*, “[t]o say that life is absurd, the conscience must be alive. How is it possible, without making remarkable concessions to one’s desire for comfort, to preserve exclusively for oneself the benefits of such a process of reasoning? From the moment that life is recognized

as good, it becomes good for all men” (*The Rebel* 6). Life’s absurdity in Rambert’s case presents itself as being the conflict he had to face between his two life missions—happiness with love and service to the people.

Likewise, Rieux’s dispute with Father Paneloux after the death of Mr. Othon’s young son not only embodies Camus’s acceptance of differences but also his appreciation for authenticity. According to Rieux, “Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn’t come into contact with death; that’s why he can speak with such assurance of the truth—with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed thinks as I do. He’d try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence” (Camus 126). It is as though the doctor provides the priest with an excuse for not seeing the matter of the plague the way he himself did, seeing that “[he had] seen too much of hospitals to relish any idea of collective punishment. But, as you know, Christians sometimes say that sort of thing without really thinking it. They’re better than they seem” (Camus 125). With Rambert, Paneloux and many others, Camus creates space for the individual character to be just that—an individual character within the scope of the narrative.

If one were indeed to read Camus’s *The Plague* as an allegory for a totalitarian political regime, we might identify the ways that it is represented as faulty and insufficient at a time of crisis: “The really remarkable thing, and Rambert was greatly struck by this, was the way in which, in the very midst of catastrophe, offices could go on functioning serenely and take initiatives of no immediate relevance, and often unknown to the highest authority, purely and simply because that had been created originally for this purpose” (Camus 108). Indeed, at the initial disruption of all normalcy in Oran and breakout of the plague, officials went about their daily duties as normal, neglecting the urgent cry of a people in panic. In fact, upon being confronted with the goings on outside government building walls, officials warned *The*



*Plague*'s protagonists against speaking the truth with regard to what they were seeing. The concealment of truth becomes the regime's method of keeping public anxiety at bay.

Perhaps one of the prominent ways by which politicians and world leaders actively conceal the truth from the public is through the media and news coverage. Thus, Camus presents this peculiar journalistic development in the context of the plague:

In spite of the growing shortage of paper, which has compelled some dailies to reduce their pages, a new paper has been launched: the *Plague Chronicle*, which sets out 'to inform our townspeople, with scrupulous veracity, of the daily progress or recession of the disease; to supply them with the most authoritative opinions available as to its future course; to offer the hospitality of its columns to all, in whatever walk of life, who wish to join in combating the epidemic; to keep up the morale of the populace; to publish the latest orders issued by the authorities; and to centralize the efforts of all who desire to give active and wholehearted help in the present emergency'. (Camus 119)

While the media was being utilized by the authorities to instill certain ideals and beliefs in the minds of the suffering public, Rieux and those working with him were doing what they could to practically and directly save lives. Camus presents the government as a grand and indifferent entity that bears no relation to the actual lives of its people. Speaking from pedestals, so to speak, the government officials are taken by the majority at their word and therefore calm the ruckus by convincing people to comply with the given situation. By engaging in hands-on activity, despite governmental discouragement, the protagonists of *The Plague* rebel against the status quo, risking their lives in the attempt to make a difference.

Indeed, “[o]fficialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic” (Camus 124), and it is up to the discontented individual to act for change.

Within the grander framework of the state institution and its integration of people into a collective whole, we may regard religion—especially as intrinsically incorporated within the ruling regime—as an entity whose role is to more or less replicate the regime itself. Camus exhibits this theory through his preliminary presentation of Father Paneloux. Throughout the early stages of the plague, a time when the people of Oran were in desperate need for a rationalization of the new events taking place around them, Paneloux delivered a speech to the shaken people in which he points accusatory fingers at a sinful people. Speaking solely through the pronoun ‘you’, Paneloux leaves no room for innocence among the plague-stricken people, simplistically concluding that one’s infliction by the pestilence may only be explained through the individual’s eternal state of sin and unrepentance. It isn’t until Father Paneloux himself comes into first-hand contact with a dying young and innocent boy that his horizons are broadened. Finally, he is able to identify the plague as a force that is, in its very nature, unfair and indifferent to the human individual, regardless of how guilty or innocent that individual may be.

In considering Camus’s *The Plague* as an analogy for the futility of life in general, it becomes ironic that such an abstract notion as the plague, which is no respecter of persons, tended to isolate the people of Oran, one by one:

It seemed that, for obvious reasons, the plague launched its most virulent attacks on those who lived, by choice or by necessity in groups: soldiers, prisoners, monks, and nuns . . . the plague was no respecter of persons and under its despotic rule everyone, from the warden down to the humblest

delinquent, was under sentence and, perhaps for the first time, impartial justice reigned in the prison. (Camus 170)

The very nature of the plague was that it multiplied human contacts. Naturally, those who had come into contact with plagued individuals were forced into quarantine, in order to preserve their chance of survival: “Thus the disease, which apparently had forced on us the solidarity of a beleaguered town, disrupted at the same time long-established communities and sent men out to live, as individuals, in relative isolation’ (Camus, 1948: 141, qtd. in. Sharpe). And in reading the novel as an analogy for life and death, the argument may be made that each man does indeed face the inevitability of an end on his own. Camus, in agreement with this supposition, presents death as the framework through which humans have their being, whether in times of plague or in the daily futility of a death-bound life: “[I]t’s something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?” (Camus 126).

In his heated debate with Paneloux, Rieux dismisses the notion of an afterlife altogether in his quest to give life meaning. Here, Rieux is found to acknowledge death as being the defining factor of every man’s life. However, the protagonist also embodies a noble sense of optimism in his determination to rebel against the inevitability of death. Again, accepting his being-in-this-world, Rieux views his “struggle against death” as the act of rebellion against the reduction of life to sheer mortality. Essentially, Rieux understands the fact that there will always be those who are poor and suffering; he rebels against this being the only solution—at least while he is alive—by doing what he can, using what he has. Throughout *The Plague*, Camus presents his audience with a character who is able to find joy, express kindness and show love in the midst of the plague; and it is the narrator’s profound ability to do such things

at such a time that functions, in itself, as the greatest act of rebellion against both a totalitarian regime that effectively suppresses humanity at its core and against the futility of life that leaves the complacent human being indifferent and without vocation.

Camus wrote *The Plague* at a time when the world was suffering from a plague of its own. The Second World War was working towards wiping out an entire generation, taking infant and elder equally by surprise. Like Camus's plague, the war showed no favoritism, and denounced humanity all together in political efforts to 'win'. Within such detrimental conditions, Camus's publication of an autonomous work whose underlying, and prominently identifiable, message was that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise", and that at the end of the day, "a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour where one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and of devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart" (Camus 261). This message was the author's greatest act of political and social rebellion.

### Conclusion: Rebellion as a Response to the Absurd

“To fight abstraction, you must have something of it in your own make-up” (*The Plague* 91)

Albert Camus wrote his works and established his philosophical position under the dire and detrimental conditions of the Second World War. All around the artist, death was proving victorious over innocent and wicked alike, giving birth to the fundamental questions upon which he came to reflect. Throughout his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus underlines what he believes is the reality of everyman. According to him, we are all thrown into this world without the opportunity to object to our condition, and the world we are thrown into is gratuitous and indifferent to our strivings and questions. Throughout his longer artistic works, Camus presents narratives that have long been read as analogies to his theory of the absurd, and as we have seen, the protagonists of *The Stranger* and of *The Plague* can be categorized as rebels, using Camus’s own definition of the term. However, both the novels are imbued with the theory of the absurd for which the concept of rebellion becomes the only reasonable response.

*The Stranger* tells of one peculiar Meursault, whose personal conduct is offensive to society. Being the authentic character that he is, Meursault defends his reasoning behind murdering a man and is sent to a prison cell until he is sentenced to death. Meursault may be seen as a rebel against society and the abstract collective on behalf of a form of individual protest. However, if one were to separate oneself from the details of the novel, a ‘before and after’ of sorts can be identified. Before the protagonist murdered the man, he indeed was a stranger to his surroundings. His moral and religious beliefs cast him as a pariah to the point that even he could admit to his estrangement. He understood what was expected of him in certain situations but was unable to comply. But it was only while in captivity that he learned how to frame his reasons for refusing to conform. Towards the end of the novel, and as he contemplates his immersion in the here and now, Meursault speaks out on behalf of personal

authenticity. Authenticity, therefore, gives his life a distinctive character for which Meursault rebels to his death. Meursault finally comes to terms with his incarceration: “No, there was no way out, and no one can imagine what nights in prison are like” (*The Stranger* 81). This idea of there being “no way out”, however, holds true even beyond the cell’s four walls. In an absurd Camusan world, there indeed seems to be ‘no way out’ of a sense of the absurd and the claustrophobic reality of the inauthentic. Thus, “Since we’re all going to die, its obvious that when and how don’t matter” (*The Stranger* 114). What does matter, on the other hand, is *why* one dies.

Where throughout *The Stranger*, incarceration is displayed in a literal sense, through Meursault’s confinement in a jail cell, Camus presents the claustrophobic reality of the absurd much more metaphorically throughout *The Plague*. In a city where nothing out of the ordinary takes place, a deadly and ruthless plague was initially difficult for the people of Oran to believe. After displaying this initial denial, Camus establishes the plague as an unavoidable reality by placing all of Oran under conditions of quarantine. Overnight, and with no prior reason to panic, the Oranians (and non-Oranians within Oran) find themselves enclosed within the metaphoric four walls of a town whose only assured promise was death. Journalist, tourist and child alike were just as susceptible to the abstraction at hand—namely death—and were helpless to protect themselves from its ravages.

In this absurdist trajectory, the town of Oran represents life in any town. The individual is thrown into life with the expectation of blending into the whole and of pushing his or her rock up the allotted hill, all the while making no authentic noise. The only certainty is that death will overtake one person just as indifferently as the other. In his first essays, Camus argued that the only reasonable solution was suicide: if death is to come, and if its arrival is the only absolute truth, then it is best to assume agency for its arrival by taking one’s own life. However, during the period of writing two remarkable novels, Camus had

come to substitute suicide with rebellion as a more fitting response to the absurd. As is true in Oran, everyman is thrown into a world whose only certainty is death.

The question is, will the individual choose to dissolve into the abstraction—be it an indifferent totalitarian regime, a religion of overarching rules and laws for judgment, or a societal cloud of inauthenticity—or will he rebel against the collective, and on behalf of other human beings, for true authenticity and all that it entails? Needless to say, the question of ethics cannot be ignored. But the source of morality is at the crux of the decision: Will the individual allow abstract collective institutions (politics, society, and religion) to set his moral compass, or will he learn to act out of an authentic motivation? Camus's protagonists knew how to answer this question in the hour of crisis.

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