THE DEATH THEME IN ALBERT CAMUS' PLAYS

APPROVED:

Major Professor

Consulting Professor

Minor Professor

Chairman of the Department of English

Dean of the Graduate School

Arnault, Glen C., The Death Theme in Albert Camus's Plays. Master of Arts (English), December, 1970, 75 pp., bibliography, 26 titles.

The purpose of this thesis is to consider Camus's use of the death metaphor and its probable meaning for him. He equated death with nihilism. Nihilism had infected European culture, and Camus felt that the patient was in his death throes and would die if an antidote were not found soon and put to use. It was necessary to find a way out of this *cul-de-sac* of death.

Camus's works can be divided into three periods; and the works in each period form a cycle dealing with a certain question which Camus had proposed to himself. This thesis examines the first two cycles. Camus's death left the third cycle unfinished.

The first cycle was called the cycle of Sisyphus and contained *The Stranger*, *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The two plays of this period, *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*, are analyzed in detail in order to see how Camus felt about death and about the importance of life. This first cycle asks the question, "Why live?" The second cycle was the Promethean period and contained *The Plague*, *State of Siege*, *The Just Assassins*, and *The Rebel*. The two plays in this section are *State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*; they attempt to probe the question of murder--was another person's life important?

The overall analysis shows how Camus' world view was developed by his sense of tragedy in our century. The death metaphor was used by him to portray his feeling of tragedy within his society: a tragedy caused by widespread acceptance of nihilistic attitudes within his culture.

The death metaphor is invoked within the pattern of nihilism, thereby showing that acceptance of its principles can only bring a death in life--a sterile existence and destruction. Camus states in The Myth of Sisyphus that each man, at some time, gains an awareness of the absurd, but the vision of this abyss of "nothingness" should not lead to despair. Man must search for a way beyond nihilism--his alienation from the universe and man. Even if he cannot know whether there is or is not an afterlife, man should not accept the principle that all is permitted. There must be limits to a man's freedom. It is not nor can anything ever be absolute; and a man must rebel against anyone or anything that tries to negate human love or respect for another's beliefs or feelings. Man is destroyed by hate, lies, and cowardice, and also when he allows anyone to use him as an object. Man creates his happiness by altruistic love, humility, "poverty," and a love for this world. Camus accepts the fact that there is no logic that will ever explain the human condition. These themes are repeated in most of his works as he unfolds the meaning of tragedy in his time. Camus' thought develops by accretion--by adding

layer upon layer to the meaning of his original vision of life.

Camus' own evaluation of his thirteen-year search for truth in his time was that man must learn to face the reality of death and have this awareness give meaning to his life. He must learn to take "the responsibility for his own life with all its weight of errors and greatness."

THE DEATH THEME IN ALBERT CAMUS' PLAYS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Glen C. Arnault, B. A.
Denton, Texas

December, 1970

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	*CALIGULA*	18
III.	*THE MISUNDERSTANDING*	31
IV.	*STATE OF SIEGE*	41
V.	*THE JUST ASSASSINS*	54
VI.	CONCLUSION	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY		74

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The death theme is a central metaphor in most of Albert Camus' works. Rachel Bespaloff in an essay entitled "The World of the Man Condemned to Death" contends that all of Camus' works search for an answer to the question, "What value abides in the eyes of the man condemned to death who refuses the consolation of the supernatural?"[1] Thomas Hanna states that Bespaloff's essay is one of the most penetrating analyses yet written on Albert Camus' thought, but he does not agree that Camus' works can be related to one question. Instead Hanna contends that each cycle is undergirded by Camus' awareness that

> our century has been characterized by sickness of spirit, nihilism, and the feeling of absurdity. . . . We shall not come to terms with our times until we have analyzed and understood these phenomena for what they are.[2]

Camus probes deeply into the significance of death "until the personal dimension gives way to the social dimension,

---

[1] Rachel Bespaloff, "The World of the Man Condemned to Death," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 92.

[2] Thomas Hanna, The Thought and Art of Albert Camus (Chicago, 1958), p. 21.

wherein the significance of death becomes the guiding principle for a social and political philosophy."[3]

It is readily apparent upon a perusal of most of the critical evaluations of Camus' works that the death metaphor is at the core of his art, even though the critic may not discuss its possible meaning or significance within the pattern of Camus' thought. For example Beynon John states simply that "His thought [Camus'] is centered on death."[4] And Justin O'Brien briefly comments that Camus "throughout his work . . . constantly returned to the contemplation of death; he was a death-haunted man."[5] Germaine Brée describes Camus as "preoccupied with death."[6] She elaborates that he is in a sense the "man-sentenced-to-death";[7] and at the root of his writings in his early period was "an emotional and intellectual confrontation with the finality and inevitability of death."[8] Robert de Luppé in his essay on the development of Albert Camus' ideas summarily explains the death theme's pervading presence; "All real experience brings one face to

---

[3] Ibid., p. 6.

[4] S. Beynon John, "Albert Camus: A British View," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Germaine Brée (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), p. 91.

[5] Justin O'Brien, "Albert Camus: Militant," in Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 20.

[6] Germaine Brée, Albert Camus (New York, 1964), p. 21.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

face with death: this is the basic consideration in Camus' work."[9]

The basic experience which turned Camus' thoughts constantly to death was his contracting of tuberculosis at the age of seventeen. He was aware of imminent death:

> Death was faithful at my bedside;
> I used to get up with it every morning.[10]

In regard to this probable controlling influence of disease upon the author's writings, Philip Thody comments in an explanatory footnote about an entry in Camus' Notebooks:

> This entry . . . supports the views of those critics who see Camus's early work as strongly marked by his reaction to tuberculosis. He first fell ill in 1930, and never seems to have been completely cured, since he had relapses in 1936, 1942, 1949. The tone here is almost that of a man seeking some consolation for a fate which he knows is inevitable and which he detests.[11]

Germaine Brée reiterates that "it was Camus's illness that seemed to have awakened his mind to questions he might otherwise have ignored."[12] And Camus, himself, revealingly

---

[9]Robert de Luppé, Albert Camus, translated by John Cumming and J. Hargreaves (New York, 1968), p. 88.

[10]Albert Camus, The Fall, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1956), p. 91.

[11]Albert Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, translated by Philip Thody (New York, 1965), p. 17.

[12]Brée, Albert Camus, p. 10.

testifies "for any artist . . . there is a single source of inspiration."[13]

Brée, also, emphasizes the fact that it was Camus' confrontation with disease and impending death which led him to "his discovery of his need to write and his decision to become a writer."[14] This important decision occurred in 1936, following a second virulent attack of tuberculosis. The recurrence of the disease permanently interrupted his doctoral studies at the University of Algiers. All his hopes for a career as a professor of philosophy were smashed. This second admission to a state sanitarium was almost terminated in death.[15] It is this near-death experience which is reflected in his writings; as a youth, he feared death, and he had a passionate desire to live. In order to live and to remain sane, he found that he needed to externalize his phantom of death. This could be accomplished by exposing it in the light of his art. This need for exorcism forms the base of all his art. Camus refused to accept passively his fate of death, because he explains:

> I love life--that's my real weakness.
> I love it so much that I am incapable
> of imagining what is not life.[16]

Camus' need to find a reason for life is apparent:

---

[13]Germaine Brée, Camus, rev. ed. (New York, 1964), p. 60.

[14]Ibid., p. 23.

[15]Hanna, The Thought and Art of Albert Camus, p. xiii.

[16]Camus, The Fall, p. 76.

> His Notebooks in these early years reveal his intense concern with ethical values, his need to establish a passionately loved life on intellectual foundations that seemed valid to him. Camus was never to abandon this search. It was the strongest driving force behind his work, and it made a writer of him.[17]

Camus copied into his Notebooks an image which richly describes why he constantly placed the death metaphor in the center of his basic writings:

> The last of the Carraras, a prisoner in a Padua emptied by the plague and besieged by the Venetians, strode through all the rooms of his palace shouting at the top of his voice: He was calling on the devil and asking him for death.[18]

Philip Thody includes Camus' explanation of this imagery in "The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 90, as a means of surmounting death."[19] Another important passage found in the Notebooks illuminates why Camus believed his research on death in his art would allow him to surmount physical death; he underlined the quotation from Tolstoy to stress its importance:

> The existence of death compels us either to give up life of our own free will, or to change our life *in such a way as to give it a meaning that cannot be taken from it by death.*[20]

In other words, Camus created his works in order to make life meaningful for himself.

---

[17] Brée, Camus, pp. 26-27.

[18] Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, p. 183. [19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p. 203.

In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus candidly discusses and explains his method and reasons for writing. It would seem after reading his confessions in this essay that his ability to write had saved him from suicide. Moreover, the essay shows that his need to be understood and accepted by other humans was almost obsessional. His fear of death forms the web from which this thought constantly struggles to escape. His art allowed him to look at himself in a mirror of his refracted experiences. This projected image gave him the comforting illusion of being able to escape his fate; for in this way, he could push the experience from a specific adventure into the impersonal universal. Camus always remained ironically honest with himself; he fully acknowledged to the world that his art was a form of therapy---an absolution, washing him free of his nihilism. His art kept him from despair:

> It [the work of art] does not offer an escape for the intellectual ailment. Rather, it is one of the symptoms of that ailment which reflects it throughout a man's whole thought. But for the first time it makes the mind get outside of itself and places it in oppositions to others, not for it to get lost but to show it clearly the blind path that all have entered upon.[21]

He emphasized that "the idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false."[22] To him art was a sacred commitment which might give him a world of hope and meaning.

---

[21] Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955), p. 71.

[22] Ibid.

The difficulty arose when he attempted to objectify his experiences. He admits that "the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work. That osmosis raises the most important of aesthetic problems."[23] But "to create is . . . to give a shape to one's fate."[24] For art, he explains, "gives a shape to hope . . . . It [life] is not the tragic game it was to be. It [art] gives meaning to the author's life."[25] His art was a revolt against acceptance of his human condition:

> It is also the staggering evidence of man's sole dignity: the dogged revolt against his condition, perseverance in an effort considered sterile. . . . But perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality.[26]

He desperately wanted

> to know whether, accepting a life *without appeal*, one can also agree to work and create *without appeal* and what is the way leading to these liberties. I want to liberate my universe of its phantoms and to people it solely with flesh-and-blood truths whose presence I cannot deny.[27]

Camus assumes that when there is no God or knowable meaning, man must create myths in order to establish an order of meaning. For writing "is first of all the individual

---

[23]*Ibid.*, p. 72.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 86.

[25]*Ibid.*, p. 100.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 85.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 75.

adventure of a soul in quest of its grace."[28] His individual adventure was his journey from the void of nothingness, from nihilism. Death had, at first, left him

> nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic, or a religion, but stones, flesh, stars, and those truths the hands can touch.[29]

And from these things that "the hands can touch," he proceeded, in effect, to create myths in order to find an ethical basis for his beliefs.

Therefore, he questioned whether there was a meaning to his experiences by creating a fictional world where he could view life with a sharper understanding;[30] for he believed that awareness of the real world was keenest in a created world of art.[31] To create a fictional world was the fulfillment of a need to clothe an abstract thought in "its props of flesh."[32] Art also gave a unity to reality which otherwise it would lack.[33] For him, creative expression began where thought could not explain clearly.[34] Art allowed Camus "to examine, to enlarge, and enrich"[35] his experiences vicariously. It was "living doubly."[36] In his works he sketched the landscape

---

[28] Ibid., p. 94. [29] Ibid., p. 112. [30] Ibid., p. 84.

[31] Ibid., p. 76. [32] Ibid., p. 74.

[33] Albert Camus, The Rebel, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 253.

[34] Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 73.

[35] Ibid., p. 70. [36] Ibid.

of an absurd[37] confrontation with reality.[38] For Camus, art existed only because the world was not clear;[39] art was the nostalgic search for meaning which was incapable of being known except through symbols.[40] He multiplied his experiences by creating a succession of works which were "but a series of approximations of the same thought."[41] Each of his works was a piece cut out of the author's experience in which he reconstructed the world to his plan:[42]

> an imaginary world . . . which is created by the rectification of the actual world--a world where suffering can, if it wishes, continue until death, where passions are never distracted, where people are prey to obsessions and always present to one another. Man is finally able to give himself the alleviating form and limits which he pursues in vain in his own life. . . . In this way it competes with creation and, provisionally, conquers death.[43]

His fiction was "a facet of the diamond in which the inner luster is epitomized without being limited."[44] For him literature was an aid in finding a middle path; for only the middle road led "to the faces of men."[45] He believed that he could recognize his course by examining "the paths

---

[37]"The 'absurd' was used in a wide variety of contexts to designate the incomprehensible, the unpredictable, the purposeless, incongruous, 'impossible' aspects of life." Brée, Albert Camus, p. 28.

[38]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 84.

[39]Ibid., p. 73. [40]Ibid., p. 70. [41]Ibid., p. 84.

[42]Ibid., p. 72. [43]Camus, The Rebel, p. 264.

[44]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 73.

[45]Ibid.

that stray from it,"[46] and that "art can never be so well served as by a negative thought."[47] After he described and examined his experience in the closed universe of his novels and plays, Camus presented in an essay the approximations of truth which he had uncovered in his research.

From the preceding review of Camus' feelings about artistic creation, the ambitious scheme upon which the young writer was to embark can be readily understood. Apparently, around 1937, he outlined the course of his life's works and did not vary greatly from the original plan. His project was an investigation into the metaphysical meanings of man which would result in finding an ethical basis for life. It was of utmost importance to him to search for a valid knowledge of man. Fate would not cheat him of his vocation, for through art he could still be a metaphysician. The evidence of this outline can be found in his Notebooks,[48] interviews, and essays. His other works outside of this outline lie marginal to its major themes.

He divided his research into three stages.[49] The first stage was an investigation of man's relationship to the

---

[46] Ibid., pp. 83-84. [47] Ibid., p. 84.

[48] Camus, Notebooks, pp. 182, 189.

[49] All of the following details about the cycle development in Camus' works are taken from Brée, Albert Camus, pp. 11-12.

universe, or as Camus simply stated, "Why live?" The second was a search into the background of social living, or as he summarized, "How live?" The third phase was to have been an investigation for an ethical basis for man; but this last effort was interrupted by his death. The research of each stage or cycle was to be subdivided into three parts, consisting of a novel, a play, and an essay. To each of the first two cycles an extra play was added. In the third cycle he completed only two first drafts, one for a novel, The First Man, and the other for a play, Don Juan.

When he was questioned about the relationship of his essays to his novels, Camus explained the formation of his cycles:

> I write on different levels precisely to avoid mixing genres. So I wrote plays in the language of action, essays in a rational form, novels about the heart's obscurity. True these different kinds of books say the same thing. But, after all, they were written by the same author and together, they form a single work.[50]

His novel was a detailing of the sense experience which had given the awareness of the metaphysical problem. Camus called his novels *récits*, indicating that the contents were a narration of an event. The narrator relates a certain experience which has caused a great change in his life; the results of this experience or the reason behind the experience is never clearly comprehended by the narrator, for he is

---

[50] Ibid., p. 12.

entrapped within the web of his own story, and he is unable to bring the tale to a definite conclusion. Death, which could give the recitation an ending and a possible knowable meaning, is never reached. These stories without an end will remain forever ambiguous. Without Death, there are no fixed relationships of facts. In The Stranger "Camus leaves Meursault on the threshold of a new awareness and a new passion, suspended between life and death."[51] In The Plague Rieux is left on the streets of Oran, watching the celebration of the plague's retreat; he knows that the plague never dies, and that one day "it would raise up its rats again and send them to die in a happy city."[52] And in The Fall Clamence is last seen in his "cell of little ease," "on the brink of a leap he will never take."[53]

His novels present the symptoms of an ailment from which a probable diagnosis can be made, but they do not make that diagnosis themselves. In contrast to the world in his novels, Camus' plays present a world that is rounded and completed by the death of the hero. The symptoms are noted in detail, and a diagnosis is given. His plays form a laboratory from which he researched his facts for the essays. Camus uses

---

[51] Ibid., p. 19.

[52] Albert Camus, The Plague, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1948), p. 278.

[53] Brée, Albert Camus, p. 42.

> the theatre to carry out his experiments; . . . he allows the absurd logic to take its way, observe the results . . . and then looks for the fault: the tragic flaw. Caligula is a research laboratory for the theoretician of The Rebel.[54]

Camus chooses the drama as his laboratory, for tragedy has set rules and purpose--a fixed universe. "The drama's whole effort is to show the logical system which, from deduction to deduction, will crown the hero's misfortune."[55] Within the world of the drama he could test and experiment with the problem and bring it to a conclusion, thereby gaining an understanding and a possible solution to the question proposed.

The essay that concludes each of the cycles is a discussion of the artist's conclusions, which he had gained from his experiments. He compares his results with his own personal feelings and expounds upon the revelance of his conclusions.

The first cycle contains a récit, The Stranger; a play, Caligula; an essay, The Myth of Sisyphus; and an added play, The Misunderstanding. He "grouped them together under a single label--Sisyphus: Cycle of the Absurd."[56] He uses Sisyphus as a symbol for the first series because "Sisyphus had put Death in chains."[57] Also, Sisyphus rejects the god's

---

[54]de Luppé, Albert Camus, p. 79.

[55]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 95.

[56]Brée, Albert Camus, pp. 11-12.

[57]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 88.

demand for him to return to darkness because he loved this world too well. It was necessary for the god to snatch him from his joys and to take him forcibly to the underworld and to his punishment.[58] "Sisyphus is the absurd hero" because of "his scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life."[59] The first series was then a question of metaphysical revolt; it is a "man's protest against his own condition as well as all creation; it is metaphysical because its protest concerns the ultimate ends of man and of creation."[60]

In the essay of this first cycle, The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus states his thesis for the series: "that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions."[61] This first cycle attempts to resolve the problem of suicide:

> The answer . . . is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate. . . . Even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism.[62]

The second cycle contains a récit, The Plague; two plays, The Just Assassins and State of Siege; and an essay, The Rebel. "He grouped them under a single label--'Prometheus: Cycle of Revolt.'"[63] Prometheus is the symbol for this series, for he rebelled against Zeus because of his love for mankind.

---

[58]Ibid., p. 89. [59]Ibid.

[60]Hanna, The Art and Thought of Albert Camus, p. 105.

[61]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 4.

[62]Ibid., p. v. [63]Brée, Albert Camus, p. 12.

> As in the time of Prometheus . . . /‾men_7 entertain blind hopes /‾a faith in God and eternity_7. They need to be shown the way and cannot do without preaching.[64]

This gospel of God's death becomes the prime mission of Prometheus. In God's place he will enthrone the tyranny of man. "In absurd terms . . . revolt against men is also directed against God: great revolutions are always metaphysical."[65] And "if he /‾God_7 does not exist, everything depends on us."[66] Unfortunately, "with God dead, there remains only history and power."[67] The world of history is the story of rebellion and tyranny. The nihilism resulting from God's death has infected western culture for the last century, and this same nihilism has spawned a destructive series of revolutions and crushing despotisms. Camus felt that if this nihilism remained predominant in Europe, its negative philosophy would destroy western civilization. The negative element within the historical spirit is its inability to furnish any limits:

> The historical spirit and the artist both want to remake the world. But the artist . . . knows his limits, which the historical spirit fails to recognize. This is why the latter's aim is tyranny whereas the former's passion is freedom.[68]

---

[64] Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 80.

[65] Ibid., p. 94.

[66] Ibid., p. 80.

[67] Ibid., p. 136.

[68] Ibid., p. 137.

Without a positive moral system enforced by a belief in its code, one falls into the hell of the rule of master and slave:

> Since nothing is either true or false, good or bad, our guiding principle will be . . . 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.[69]

With the nightmarish experience of Hitler's humiliating oppression in the background, Camus had full awareness of the need to expose and exorcise the phantoms of nihilism still existing within his culture. As Doctor Rieux in The Plague states, one must be able to recognize the disease for what it is before a cure can be found.[70] Therefore, the question proposed in the second cycle was to describe the disease of nihilism in order to know how to prepare an antidote--a renaissance of ethical beliefs. "The important thing, therefore, is not, as yet, to go to the root of things, but, the world being what it is, to know how to live in it."[71] Camus' conclusions in The Rebel, published in 1951, were that Europe was in the midst of changing values which had caused a century of bloodshed and imprisonment for man. The third cycle, labeled "Nemesis: Goddess of Limits," would have been an attempt to establish a positive moral view within a world that contained no promise of a future utopia or a heaven.

---

[69]Camus, The Rebel, p. 5. [70]Camus, The Plague, p. 278.

[71]Camus, The Rebel, p. 4.

The purpose of this thesis is to consider Camus' use of the death metaphor and its probable meaning for him. He equated death with nihilism; nihilism had infected European culture, and Camus felt that the patient was in his death throes and would die if an antidote were not found soon and put to use. It was necessary to find a way out of this _cul-de-sac_ of death. This study attempts to clarify Camus' world view or _Weltanschauung_. It is concerned with the first two cycles and analyzes in detail the four plays. The over-all analysis shows how Camus' world view was developed by his sense of tragedy in our century, and that he used the death metaphor to portray his feeling of tragedy within his society: a tragedy of nihilism.

This thesis is limited mainly to a close textual analysis of primary sources. However, for interpretation, the thesis relies heavily on three key secondary sources: Germaine Bree, _Camus_; Thomas Hanna, _The Thought and Art of Albert Camus_; and Rachel Bespaloff's essay, "The World of the Man Condemned to Death."

CHAPTER II

CALIGULA

In Europe for the last century a trend of thought which begins with the awareness "of an impossibility of finding a rational justification for any system of moral values"[1] has developed into an intellectual crisis equaled only at times of a great historical transition such as the breakdown of the Roman Empire. This crisis is characterized by the wide acceptance of nihilism. In his first cycle Camus reveals an intense concern to establish a reason for a love of life, on a solid intellectual foundation, that would seem valid to him. He rejects nihilism because he can not passively accept his illness and death. Why live? This question was to become "the strongest driving force behind his works."[2]

Camus notes at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "the pages that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age."[3] The essay was an investigation of existential philosophies which contained

---

[1]Germaine Brée, *Camus*, rev. ed. (New York, 1964), p. 26.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

[3]Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955), p. 2.

certain negative attitudes that, if developed fully and accepted, would lead to negating life. Camus' answer was a refutation. Even though he could not give any definite reasons to support his belief that their negative attitudes were wrong, he could not accept the idea that life had no importance. He continued his search:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. . . . These are the facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.[4]

The search to refute the prevalent ideas contained in certain existentialist philosophies begins with The Stranger. In The Stranger Meursault is sentenced to death, not for his murder of an Arab, but for his indifference to life -- for his not showing any apparent concern for his mother's death nor any deep feeling for anyone. He has drifted through life feeling only the pleasure of the moment. It is only after he has been sentenced to death that he gains an awareness of the importance of and the necessity for his life. The heart gives its answer when he is confronted by the priest in his prison cell. Meursault for the first time in the novel shows strong emotion; he becomes very angry. The priest offers to him the consolation of an afterlife in place of this one which he is so soon to lose.

---

[4] Ibid., p. 3.

But all Meursault wants is this life on earth--to feel this sun and wind, to feel these stones and this water, and to feel these passions of love and of joy; no promise of anything unknown will satisfy or console him for the loss of this life, which is all that he is capable of grasping. Even though there is no understandable meaning to death or life, the heart knows that life is worth clinging to with a passionate tenacity; for this life is the only tangible thing. Meursault rejects the priest and all that he represents. He turns instead to the consolation of nature and to his memories of past happiness.

The indifference of a world devoid of God, where nothing has any importance or value, leaves for Meursault only the feeling of the need to live with all of his senses attuned to the beauty of living. But Camus was bothered by Meursault's acceptance that to kill or not to kill the Arab was equally logical. Meursault apparently fell from innocence into guilt through an indifference to the value of life, as he comments to himself in his cell:

> Yes, this was the evening hour when--how long ago it seemed!--I always felt so well content with life. Then, what awaited me was a night of easy, dreamless sleep. This was the same hour, but with a difference; I was returning to a cell, and what awaited me was a night haunted by forebodings of the coming day. And so I learned that familiar paths traced in the dusk of summer evenings may lead as well to prisons as to innocent, untroubled sleep.[5]

---

[5]Albert Camus, The Stranger, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1946), p. 123.

This same thought of "familiar paths" leading into a wrong choice in life becomes the background of Caligula. When faced with death, Caligula, like Meursault, chooses the wrong path which leads him to a "superior [form of] suicide."[6] According to Camus, a superior form of suicide exists when one of his characters dies for an idea. Caligula strays from the right path; he is an absurd man who "catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, beyond which all is collapse and nothingness."[7]

When Caligula opens, Caligula has come face to face with the absurdity of the world. Caligula's sister Drusilla has died, and Caligula is filled with horror and fear. He is faced with the awareness that life has no meaning; as he leaves the palace, all he can repeat is "Nothing."[8] But before Drusilla's death, Caligula had believed in a knowable, rational universe. He was artistic and well educated. He tried to do good and to be just. He believed that the only mistake a man could make in life was to cause others to suffer. He was an idealist and was a misfit because of his idealism. And now, "Nothing."

---

[6]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 78.

[7]Ibid., p. 44.

[8]Albert Camus, Caligula and Three Other Plays, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1958), p. 8.

Caligula wanders for three days in a private hell with his vision of "nothing." During these three days when Caligula faces the absurdity of man, he finds the world intolerable. His anguish separates him from the world. He cannot stand his aloneness, but he still is an idealist. He has found truth, and he wants others to know and to understand it: "Men die; and they are not happy."[9] Since he possesses the power and since he believes that he knows the basic truth, he will give the people the awareness of this truth. He will clear away their self-deceptions and lies and he will expose their naked selves in order that each may know the nothingness of life. Caesonia unknowingly points out the flaw in Caligula's plan: "And Caligula, of course, sees nothing but his own idea."[10]

Caligula's first mistake is to think that he can give a logical reason to the universe. "The only way to give meaning to anything is to follow every idea to the end at all costs."[11] Caligula wants the moon because it is symbolic of the impossible. If he can make the impossible possible, then his world will once again have meaning and this taste of nothingness will be gone. He will have confronted the irrational and will have derived from it happiness and a coherent unity with meaning in a knowable

---

[9] Camus, Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. 8.

[10] Ibid., p. 10.

[11] Ibid., p. 8.

universe. "And when all is leveled out, when the impossible has come to earth and the moon is in my hands--then, perhaps, I shall be transfigured and the world renewed; then men will die no more and at last be happy."[12]

The only way to give a reasonable meaning to the universe is through power, his power as emperor. He will impose his will upon man and will recreate another world. Caligula turns his back on friendship, love, morality, religion, and art; and he decides to put an end to memories. Instead he will exploit the impossible. From now on the only existence is his own; the rest of the universe he must fill with his own reason. His revolt takes the form of evil; as he looks in the mirror, it is filled with a grotesque, distorted vision of himself. As the curtain falls on the first act, Caligula has decided to be free and to live passionately in a succession of present moments. In the mirror he realizes that he wants to become not himself but an actor, for an actor recreates varying images of life. Acting a role, like looking in the mirror, gives a comforting illusion of self; also, it is a means of self-evasion. Caligula acts a part in the rest of the play; he hopes to elude reality by playing multiple roles.

In the second act Caligula carries out his program to instruct the populace in the truth. For three years he has

---

[12] Ibid., p. 17.

preached his gospel, but all his acts of violence only increase the size of the original wound within his soul. His loneliness is filled with torment. The only fact that becomes apparent to Caligula is that he cannot change this world of sheep; he is filled overflowingly with scorn for humanity.

In the third act Caligula has dropped the role of teacher and has decided to become a god in this godless universe:

> There's no understanding fate; therefore I choose to play the part of fate. I wear the foolish, unintelligible face of a professional god.
> . . . .
> Any man can play lead in the divine comedy and become god. All he needs to do is to harden his heart.[13]

If men will not learn his truth then, perhaps, through adoration of his godliness, they will recognize the absurdity and meaningless of the universe. He plays his absurd part to perfection and almost loses himself in his role. But faced with Cherea's plot to assassinate him, Caligula once again faces the mirror and sees Caligula the man. He recognizes his mistakes and his eternal guilt in taking the lives of others. In this recognition scene Caligula has the choice of averting his death and taking the right freedom. He has recognized his "fatal flaw," but he refuses to change:

---

[13] *Ibid*., pp. 44-45.

> Logic, . . . follow where logic leads.
> Power to the uttermost; willfulness without end.
> Ah, I'm the only man on earth to know the
> secret--that power can never be complete without
> a total self-surrender to the dark impulse of
> one's destiny. No, there's no return. I must
> go on and on, until the consummation.[14]

This speech is the turning point of the play. Caligula's decision that power is everything seals his fate and leads to his inevitable death.

In the action rising to his death, Caligula's conversation with Cherea shows him the right road to freedom, but Caligula still refuses to change; for he no longer is a creator of an ideal world, but a destroyer. Cherea says:

> Were logic everything, I'd kill or fornicate. . . .
> But I consider that these passing fancies have no
> great importance. If everyone set to gratifying
> them, the world would be impossible to live in,
> and happiness, too, would go by the board.[15]

Scipio, the poet, also chastizes Caligula; "one may deny something without feeling called upon to besmirch it, or deprive others of the right of believing in it."[16] He warns Caligula: "Hatred does not compensate for hatred. Power is no solution. Personally I know only one way of countering the hostility of the world we live in."[17] Caligula asks what is Scipio's answer to life; Scipio replies "Poverty."[18] To

---

14 Ibid., pp. 49-50.

15 Ibid., p. 52.

16 Ibid., pp. 42-43.

17 Ibid., p. 43.

18 Ibid., p. 44.

Scipio this symbol of poverty means ridding oneself of all the trappings of civilization which have estranged man from his universe and made him an alien in his own world. Poverty wipes away all the entangling things that keep a man from seeing and knowing well the sun, wind, sea, and stars. Man must learn to love his world again and not to destroy it with his hatred arising from his feeling of alienation from it. Death for Scipio is only sleep before the renewal of life.

Caligula apparently realizes that Cherea and Scipio are right and that he has been wrong to create his lonely vision of a dead world. All is not permitted, and he cannot play the part of a god on earth; for no matter what he does, he cannot attain the impossible--freedom from death. Therefore Caligula burns the evidence of the assassination plot; he chooses "a superior form of suicide" and he allows Cherea to return to the plotters, thereby allowing the plan for his death to be fulfilled.

In the fourth act Caligula makes another re-evaluation of his truth. He realizes that he is at home only in the company of his dead. No living person is near him; he has completely isolated himself from mankind. Caesonia is the only witness, and with her death he frees himself from the living. After killing Caesonia, he again faces the Caligula in the mirror, and he sees that in the last role as a destroyer of life he has destroyed himself; he breaks the

mirror. Even though the assassins kill him, Caligula knows that it is he who is the real murderer. The play ends with Caligula's death as a form of community sacrifice. And Caligula shouts, "I'm still alive."[19]

In his plays, Camus highlights the need for a positive set of values in a world devoid of meaning. Caligula displays the extreme destruction that will accompany the acceptance of a negative set of values carried to the very end. Caligula in his wild urge for life, and more life, to the uttermost, uses up everthing. Yet he wants desperately to regain his "nostalgia for unity";[20] this desire for a knowable unity is an "appetite for the absolute."[21] Caligula, in order to understand the world, has to reduce it to human terms by "stamping it with his own seal."[22] Camus believed that anything was absurd only if it were unknowable; and the only way to rid oneself of the absurdity was either through hope--that leaps into faith--or through death. Caligula, unable to find any other way to scale the absurd walls in which he has imprisoned himself, chooses death. He recognizes at the end the tragic error he has committed: he has rebelled against fate by denying his bond to mankind; he has destroyed the

---

[19]Camus, Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. 74.

[20]Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 13.

[21]Ibid., p. 38. [22]Ibid., p. 13.

lives of others. Caligula accepts death because he understands "that no one can save himself all alone and that one cannot be free at the expense of others."[23]

All of Camus' heroes in his plays, in a way, commit this "superior" suicide; knowingly they choose death. They die for an idea, but it is an idea that contains a false doctrine. Camus invokes the Christ image in order to imply that the idea for which the hero dies may be false. In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus explains the background of this symbolism of the crucified Christ.[24] His explanation of the Christ symbolism occurs in an explanation of Dostoyevsky's Kirilov, and why he committed suicide:

> It might be thought that this springs from concern to distinguish himself from Christ. But in reality it is a matter of annexing Christ. Kirilov, in fact, fancies for a moment that Jesus at his death did not find himself in Paradise. He found out then that his torture had been useless. "The laws of nature," says the engineer [Kirilov], "made Christ live in the midst of falsehood and die for a falsehood." Solely in this sense Jesus indeed personifies the whole human drama. He is the complete man, being the one who realized the most absurd condition. He is not the God-man but the man-god. And, like him, each of us can be crucified and victimized--and is to a certain degree.[25]

---

[23] Camus, "Author's Preface," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. vi.

[24] "Christ came to solve two major problems, evil and death, which are precisely the problems that preoccupy the rebel." Albert Camus, The Rebel, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 32.

[25] Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 79.

Caligula's shout at the moment of his death, "I'm still alive," probably implies that his form of evil freedom--his absolute will to power--still survives in all of us. A Caligula lies dormant within each person; and each one longs for the impossible and for an absolute freedom from all morals and from retribution. Each one, at times, would like his own world of power without any enforced controls. And it is necessary to keep this form of evil hidden and to keep it from gaining possession of his soul, lest he be like Caligula who bemoans the "darkness"[26] which occurs if there are no limits, and is "forever guilty."[27]

Camus' major themes are well stated in Caligula. The death metaphor is invoked within the pattern of nihilism, thereby showing that acceptance of its principles can only bring a death-in-life--a sterile existence and destruction. Moreover, Camus states in The Myth of Sisyphus that each man, at some time, gains an awareness of the absurd, but the vision of this abyss of "nothingness" should not lead only to despair; instead, man must search for a way beyond nihilism--his alienation from the universe and man. Even if he cannot know whether there is or is not an afterlife, man should not accept the principle that all is permitted. There must be

---

[26]Camus, Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. 73.

[27]Ibid.

limits to a man's freedom; it is not nor can it ever be absolute. Individual man must rebel against anyone or anything that tries to negate human love or respect for another's beliefs or feelings; man is destroyed by hate, lies, cowardice and by allowing anyone to use him as an object. Man creates his happiness by altruistic love, humility, "poverty," and a love for this world. Camus recognizes that the human condition cannot be logically explained. These themes recur in most of his works; Camus' thought develops by accretion--by adding layers to the meaning of his original vision of life.

CHAPTER III

THE MISUNDERSTANDING

Camus had not planned to include The Misunderstanding in the first cycle, and, in truth, it does not belong to any of the three cycles. He had considered the first period closed with the completion of The Myth of Sisyphus, or so he states in his notebooks.[1] Although a first draft of The Plague was completed in 1943, Camus was too involved with the war to proceed with work on the Promethean cycle; consequently, he laid it aside until after the war.

Camus had been interested in the possibilities of the plot material in The Misunderstanding as early as 1938, when it appeared in The Stranger. Meursault has found an old yellowed newspaper article in the mattress of his bed in prison. It contains

> . . . the story of a crime. The first part was missing, but I gathered that its scene was some village in Czechoslovakia. One of the villagers had left his home to try his luck abroad. After twenty-five years, having made a fortune, he returned to his country with his wife and child. Meanwhile his mother and sister had been running a small hotel in the village where he was born. He decided to give them a surprise and, leaving

---

[1]Albert Camus, Notebooks 1935-1942, translated by Philip Thody (New York, 1965), p. 189.

> his wife and child in another inn, he went to stay at his mother's place, booking a room under an assumed name. His mother and sister completely failed to recognize him. At dinner that evening he showed them a large sum of money he had on him, and in the course of the night they slaughtered him with a hammer. After taking the money they flung the body into the river. Next morning his wife came and without thinking, betrayed the guest's identity. His mother hanged herself. His sister threw herself into a well. I must have read that story thousands of times. In one way it sounded most unlikely; in another, it was plausible enough. Anyhow, to my mind, the man was asking for trouble; one shouldn't play fool tricks of that sort.[2]

Essentially, this is the story of The Misunderstanding except for a few details: the mother and sister drug the son and drown him in the river; there is no child; the mother drowns herself; the sister commits suicide by hanging herself; and the brother is identified by a passport first instead of by his wife.

"For a while Camus considered making a comedy of it,"[3] but in 1943, the time of the play's composition, Camus was incapable of feeling anything but stark tragedy. The time was the height of the German occupation in France, and their rule seemed endless. Like his character Meursault, Camus doubted that there would be any loophole from the death sentence of tuberculosis he faced. He was very ill again at a sanitarium within the mountains in the middle of France.

---

[2] Albert Camus, The Stranger, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1946), pp. 99-100.

[3] Germaine Brée, Camus, rev. ed. (New York, 1946), p. 151.

No wonder then that the theme of exile plays such a poignant role in The Misunderstanding. This play presents the most bleak, hopeless, enclosed, and suffocating world view in any of his works. In a preface written by Camus in 1957, he proposed that the play was

> a very dismal image of human fate. But it can be reconciled with a relative optimism as to man. For, after all, it amounts to saying that everything would have been different if the son had said: "It is I, here is my name." It amounts to saying that in an unjust or indifferent world man can save himself, and save others, by practicing the most basic sincerity and pronouncing the most appropriate word.[4]

But the play does not present any means to reconcile itself with optimism; there is no hope in the world of the inn. Death is the main performer in the play; it permeates and nullifies all action. The mother, Martha, and Jan seem as masked Greek characters; they perform their marionette dance of death to the horror of the choral figure, Maria the wife. And the old manservant, a mock version of the *deus ex machina*, ignores and refuses help to any of the characters entangled in the tragedy of the inn.

> The Misunderstanding is entirely symbolical. The land-locked inn in the center of Europe where mother and daughter so reluctantly carry out their self-imposed duty of murder; the silent servant; the son Jan, who brings with him a

---

[4]Albert Camus, "Author's Preface," in *Caligula and Three Other Plays*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1958), p. vii.

> wealth of love and life in his wife, his fortune, and his experience of happiness--all these are symbolic rather than human. . . . It is Jan's adventure which furnishes the meaning behind the spectacle--a meaning not easily or quickly grasped.[5]

The land-locked inn presents the attitudes and actions that led up to the Second World War. It portrays vividly the atmosphere of the events which precipitated western civilization into the charnel house of the European war.

Jan represents that segment of Europe's citizenry who foolishly believed that "war was impossible in our times." He has had happiness, love, and freedom, but, because he has been prodigal of his duties to his mother, he is culpable. And although Jan recognizes that he has certain duties and obligations to his mother, he is carried away by the force of things. He blindly believes that there is plenty of time to straighten out everything. He knows that he must atone for his guilt, but he delays--the delay is fatal for him. He wants his mother to recognize him and his worth. He yearns for the feast of the prodigal. Ironically, this anticipated feast turns out to be a drugged cup of tea which is served to him by Martha that she might more easily murder him.

Jan's awareness of man's condition contains half-truths. He is blind to the other side of the truth, and he stubbornly refuses any advice from Maria, nor will he see the true import

---

[5]Brée, Camus, p. 179.

of his mother's and Martha's words. This refusal to change his concept of the world directly results in his death. He never gains the awareness that his return to his mother's home has occurred at the thirteenth hour. From the beginning, Maria warns Jan not to play his game of deception if he really wants his family's acceptance:

> If one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one's name; that's common sense. Otherwise, by pretending to be what one is not, one simply muddles everything. How could you expect not to be treated as a stranger in a house you entered under false colors?[6]

Jan stubbornly repeats that he is right. His method of play acting is the only way of finding out whether or not he was correct in having dreams of a perfect tomorrow in a home where he, his wife, his mother, and his sister would exist in harmony. Jan explains:

> Only--no one can be happy in exile or estrangement. One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true that a man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world. And I believe that coming back to my country, making happy those I love, will help me to do this.[7]

Tragically, Jan delays too long saying to his mother and his sister the words which would have put everything right. He wants them to take the first step in open recognition and friendship; only then will he offer them his love and help

---

[6] Albert Camus, "The Misunderstanding," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. 83.

[7] Ibid., p. 87.

and money. He foolishly thinks that there is plenty of time to accomplish his ends, but events are already too far advanced; murder has long been an accepted way of life for the mother and her daughter. Jan's false actions, which mask his true intentions and his appearance of wealth and loneliness, make of him the perfect victim. Martha can think only about the murder; it is the lever which will open the door to her own freedom and happiness. With his money she will finally have enough wealth to attain her dreams.

Martha represents those people or nations whose selfish passions and will to power lead them to believe that anything can be justified by the end it gains them. In the thirties, the Fascist camps had fully embraced this philosophy. They assumed

> that everything was equivalent and that good and evil could be defined according to one's wishes. . . . In the absence of any human or divine code the only values were those of the animal world-- in other words, violence and cunning.[8]

Martha is very frank about all her actions; she does not care for sentimentality or illusions but strictly observes the principles which she does accept. She calls things by their names and expects to accomplish anything by dint of her will power. She tells her mother not to rationalize but to call things by their names: "Crime is crime, one should always

---

[8] Albert Camus, "Letters to a German Friend," in Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1960), p. 21.

know what one is doing."[9] Also, from the first, she warns Jan of the true situation he faces; she wants to destroy any delusion or misunderstanding which he might have:

> But remember you are in a house where the heart isn't catered to. Too many bleak years have passed over this little spot of Central Europe, and they've drained all the warmth out of this house. They have killed any desire for friendliness, and, let me repeat it, you won't find anything in the least like intimacy here.[10]

Martha excuses her crimes by the fact that they will allow her to gain her dreams of a "garden of Eden." She commits them "not for money, but for a home beside the sea, and forgetfulness of this hateful country."[11] Her dreams of happiness have obsessed her. She harshly tells Jan that

> what you call human feeling is not the nicest part of me. What is human in me is what I desire, and to get what I desire, I'd stick at nothing, I'd sweep away every obstacle on my path.[12]

All of Jan's talk of his homeland only serves to arouse Martha's desire to gain her own ends by his murder. As she tells her mother after the murder, "Thus innocence is rewarded."[13]

After throwing Jan's body in the river, Martha is ecstatic; "I feel like crying out for joy."[14] But then the

---

[9]Camus, The Misunderstanding, p. 79.

[10]Ibid., p. 96. [11]Ibid., p. 99. [12]Ibid., p. 105.

[13]Ibid., p. 117. [14]Ibid., p. 118.

manservant finds Jan's passport and hands it to her, insisting silently that she read it. A passport, symbol of safe-conduct, is the means used to acquaint Martha and her mother with the fact that they have killed their last hope for a reprieve from their crimes. The mother takes the passport and stares at it for a long while, then she tonelessly says: "Yes, I always knew it would turn out like this one day--and that would be the end. The end of all!"[15] With despair and grief she now has her certainty. In a world emptied of all meaning, one thing is sure--"a mother's love for her son."[16] She realizes she has banished all hope from her world, and she is too weary to attempt a new beginning. The mother knows that "by one act I have ruined everything. I have lost my freedom and my hell has begun."[17] She cannot face the world without the love of the son. She turns her back on Martha and goes to join Jan in death in the river.

The mother represents the nihilistic attitudes which had infected western culture. The most crucial attitude in the play is that of the mother; she allows the tragedy to happen. Her guilt is the sin of omission; habit and indifference have dominated her life until her soul is dead within her. Although the mother does not want Martha to kill the guest, she does not interfere, but only complains. And later she helps Martha to dispose of the body.

---

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 120. [16] *Ibid*, [17] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Martha never acknowledges that she has been wrong in anything which she has done. She is angry and scornful that her mother has deserted her. She commits suicide only because she cannot fulfill her dreams. Martha tells Maria, when she appears the next morning at the inn to inquire after Jan, that what has happened was not an accident, but that it was in the normal order of things. Why cry out for freedom or for love when all is futile, when there is nothing beyond, when dreams are doomed to failure?

Maria is left with this desolate conclusion. And in a low voice she says:

> I knew this play acting was bound to end in tragedy and we'd be punished, he and I, for having lent ourselves to it. I felt danger in the very air one breathes in this country.[18]

Maria cannot accept the calamity she has stumbled upon in this inn, and she wails "Oh, God, I cannot live in this desert."[19] In answer to her cries to God, the old servant, a symbol of a mock god, appears, but he refuses her any help. Maria is left kneeling, crying for aid that will never appear.

The extreme pessimism of The Misunderstanding shows everyone entrapped by death except Maria, and she is left only with the choice of suicide or of "turning her heart hard as stone."[20] The overwhelming presence of the death metaphor portrays the condition of Europe. Camus' illness and the war had completely defeated him; he felt helpless and exiled from

---

[18] Ibid., p. 129. [19] Ibid., p. 133. [20] Ibid., p. 131.

all the things that seemed important to him. Far from the sunny, sea-swept lands of his home, he was enclosed in an atmosphere of suffocating mountains and death with no view but straight up to the silent heavens.

Death and life were equally humiliating and sterile. Camus no longer could rebel against death as Caligula had, nor accept the beauties of death and of life contained in nature as Scipio had; death to him now seemed only a sterile rottenness. Like Maria he had innocently come from the south, leaving behind his happiness and love. Innocently, he had become a spectator to an overwhelming catastrophe of Europe, a mother who murdered her sons and daughters. In this metaphysical world of the inn and literally in the sanitarium, Camus could foresee no hope or dignity in life. All was contained in a senseless drama of death.

CHAPTER IV

STATE OF SIEGE

During the war years of the forties Camus came to realize more fully the sickness of nihilism and why he must reject it. Nihilism destroyed the motivation to live; "Nihilism is not only despair and negation but, above all, the desire to despair and to negate."[1]

When he first began to write in 1938, he considered nihilistic philosophy only as a personal experience. He knew that one must define the meaning of life in order to maintain the motivation to "keep going," and he knew that man's work provided the psychological commitment to life: hence, his need to write and to investigate the "Why" became compulsive. The first cycle presented the question of suicide and the importance of the individual's life. But when he confronted National Socialism, Camus came to the full awakening of man in his social environment. He saw that it was impossible to live in a vacuum; and although man was not a social animal, he found that he must learn to live as one. Therefore, the Promethean cycle was an investigation of the reason that

---

[1]Albert Camus, The Rebel, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), pp. 57-58.

Europe wallowed in this mire of self-destruction, in this plague of nihilism.

The novel of this cycle, The Plague, chronicles the experiences of the struggle of European resistance against Nazism. It was, nonetheless, to be read on several levels of meaning:

> The plague . . . symbolizes any force which systematically cuts human beings off from the living breath of life: the physical joy of moving freely on this earth, the inner joy of love, the freedom to plan our tomorrows. In a general way it is death and, in human terms, all that enters into complicity with death: metaphysical or political systems, bureaucratic abstractions, and even Tarrou's and Paneloux's efforts to transcend their humanity. In the fight against the plague there are neither heroes nor victories, there are merely men who, like Dr. Rieux and Grand, refuse to submit to evidence. However useless their actions, however insignificant, they continue to perform them. It matters little for what reasons so long as they testify to man's allegiance to men and not to abstractions or absolutes.[2]

Thus with this experience began Camus' idea of the rebel. A rebel is a man who says "No." Beyond certain limits one cannot go; there is something within man that must be respected and loved, and anyone or thing that tries to destroy or to warp man's soul must be opposed.[3] For if death is the end for all, then one must give his death a meaning in order that his life will have had meaning and beauty. A man must

---

[2] Germaine Brée, Camus, rev. ed. (New York, 1964), pp. 128-129.

[3] Camus, The Rebel, pp. 14-15.

live with honor and without fear. Man must rebel against his fear of death and not allow his fear to enslave him.

Insofar as man is capable, he must cling to love and friendship. Camus believed that man's freedom existed on the foundations of love and within the limits which that love imposed:

> When one knows of what man is capable, for better and for worse, one also knows that it is not the human being himself who must be protected but the possibilities he has within him--in other words, his freedom. I confess, insofar as I am concerned, that I cannot love all humanity except with a vast and somewhat abstract love. But I love a few men, living or dead, with such force and admiration that I am always eager to preserve in others what will someday perhaps make them resemble those I love. Freedom is nothing else but a chance to be better, whereas enslavement is a certainty of the worst.[4]

If man does not build a firm foundation on friendship and love, and if he allows himself to be controlled by his fear, he will live in a state of siege. Within this context Camus embarks on a discussion of morals for the modern man in his play _State of Siege_. "If, after all, men cannot always make history have a meaning, they can always act so that their own lives have one."[5]

State of Siege is added to the cycle written at the request and suggestion of Jean Louis Barrault who was

---

[4]Albert Camus, "Homage to an Exile," in _Resistance, Rebellion, and Death_, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1960), pp. 75-76.

[5]_Ibid._, p. 79.

fascinated by Camus' use of the plague symbolism. The play has the same thematic material as The Plague except for two factors: the symbol of the plague is narrowed to the totalitarian state; and The Plague is what was, while State of Siege is what Camus wished to be.

Camus believed that, of all his writings, State of Siege was the most representative of his thought.[6] He patterned the play after the plays called moralités in the French Middle Ages; for his play was the ultimate subject of his hopes of salvation for modern man. In his spectacle he wished to show how to find a door through the absurd walls of nihilism that would lead a way to a renaissance in Europe. "I focused my play on what seems to me the only living religion in the century of tyrants and slaves--I mean liberty. Hence it is utterly useless to accuse my characters of being symbolical. I plead guilty."[7] Therefore, State of Siege is to be read as a moral allegory of modern political realities. Camus defends and summarizes his view of the play as a defense of the individual and human love against a civilization which has become infested by abstractions and terrors inherent in totalitarian states, whether of the Left or of the Right:

---

[6]Albert Camus, "Author's Preface," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1958), p. viii.

[7]Ibid., p. ix.

> The evil of our times can be defined by its effects rather than by its causes. That evil is the State, whether a police state or a bureaucratic state. Its proliferation in all countries under cover of the most varied ideological pretexts, the revolting security granted it by mechanical and psychological means of repression make of the State a mortal danger for everything that is best in each of us. From this point of view, contemporary political society, in any form, is despicable.[8]

Camus believed that Hegel's philosophy of the State's supremacy had sown dragon's teeth by replacing God with the "dialectic" god of history, and that each tooth had risen up in this century as a full-blown nihilistic concept of a destructive ideological form of government. To Camus all ideology failed, and he condemned it because man himself was not an ideal. When one is confronted with the psychology of man, one clearly realizes that man contains evil within himself; therefore, man cannot be abstracted into a principle of absolute goodness.[9] Man cannot be placed in an utopia of absolute values because man himself is never absolutely blameless; and in order for an idealist "to ensure the adoration of a theorem for any length of time, faith is not enough; a police force is needed as well."[10]

The idea that the path to an utopian state is by way of a totalitarian government and all its forms of slavery have

---

[8]Camus, "Why Spain," in _Resistance, Rebellion, and Death_, p. 58.

[9]Camus, _The Rebel_, p. 131.

[10]_Ibid._, p. 122.

infested large populations of modern man. This idea is a form of plague, and in <u>State of Siege</u> Camus represents totalitarian government by a fat, bald-headed man who wears a plain uniform adorned by a medal. This character is called the Plague and embodies a negative attitude like that of Caligula which, if accepted, stifles man's life and deprives him of his freedom. The Plague enforces his rule by man's fear of death. Death is his secretary, who in a uniform with white cuffs and collar, carries a notebook containing every citizen's name; and at each request of the Plague, she strikes a mark through the name of the victim, who immediately falls dead.

The Plague already infests some portions of the town before he officially takes office. He exists in the inequality of justice. He exists in the lies, the immobility to change, and the inefficiency of the present government to cope with the warnings of their impending danger. He exists in the townspeople's preoccupation with "business as usual" and their own personal happiness. He exists in the Christian religion where the members ignore their Christian duties of loving and of helping their fellow man, and instead turn their backs on people in need of help, condone any governmental action, and retreat into the church instead of taking effective action in the streets where the trouble runs amuck.

The Plague takes over the reins of government by use of threats, force, lies, and the cooperation of some of the officials within the government. Immediately after taking office, he begins to rescind all of the liberties of the people. He takes away economic freedoms first, then freedom of expression; finally, through yards of red tape, he completely controls their lives. Each citizen has to have a "certificate of existence,"[11] and he exists only by the generosity of the Plague. Not one aspect of a citizen's life depends upon the individual and his struggle; all rests on the whim of the master.

Hatred and fear are spread by making each citizen become an informer on his own family and friends. This good behavior is repaid by extra food rations to the informer. Anyone who gives the slightest nod of disagreement is imprisoned, deported, or eliminated. At last there is no longer any form of dialogue, only a monologue of government propaganda. No one will offer aid to another for fear of the disease and death. In this "best of all possible worlds," the citizens have efficient organization. In a manner of speaking, the trains run on time. Each person is a statistic, and thereby, each one serves a purpose for the government.

Nada, a drunken and crippled man, represents nihilism. He welcomes the Plague and his secretary; for it is only

---

[11] Camus, "State of Siege," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, p. 175.

within the definite walls of restrictive government that he feels secure and knows what to do and what to believe. To a woman who mistakenly comes to him for help, he explains the utopia of slavery that has come to pass:

> We want to fix things up in such a way that nobody understands a word of what his neighbor says. And, let me tell you, we are steadily nearing that perfect moment when nothing anybody says will arouse the least echo in another's mind; when the two languages [the obscure official language of the government and the simple language of the people] that are fighting it out here will exterminate each other so thoroughly that we shall be well on the way to that ideal consummation--the triumph of death and silence. Choose to live on your knees rather than to die standing; thus and thus only will the world acquire that neat, nicely ordered layout whose template is the gibbet, and be shared between well-drilled ants and the placid dead: a puritan paradise without food, fields, or flowers, in which angel police float around on pinions of red tape among beatific citizens nourished on rules and regulations and groveling before this decorated God, whose delight it is to destroy and doggedly to dissipate the dear delusions of a too delicious age. Down with everything! Nobody knows what anybody means--the golden age has come.[12]

Diego, an everyman, refuses both the Plague's rule and Nada's outlook. In the beginning he did not believe the portents of the Plague nor heed Nada's warnings; he was too busy with his own personal happiness created by his fiancée, Victoria, daughter of Justice and Freedom. Then when Diego at last recognizes the infection, his fear of death and his

---

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

fear of losing his own happiness and freedom lead him into the stalemate of inactivity against the disease. Diego describes the sickening fear and helplessness that invade a man when first confronted with the full awareness of a police state:

> I feel like another man, a stranger to myself. Never have I been afraid of any human being--but what's happening now is too big for me. Even honor is no help; I'm losing grip of everything I cling to. . . . All this will end, like a bad dream. It *must*! I am too young, and I love you [Victoria] too much. I loathe the very thought of death. . . . I believe that I'm afraid.[13]

At last, after the Plague has a complete, tightly controlled prison of a state, Diego challenges the tyrant. But when the Plague calls his guards, Diego fearfully flees to the house of Justice hoping for asylum. But Justice cannot give him sanctuary; for the judge is a servant of the law, and even though the new laws are identical with crime, they will be right. When "Crime becomes the law, it ceases being crime,"[14] and the judge does not "serve the law because of what it says but because it is the law."[15] The judge also locks up his wife, Freedom, for the duration of the occupation by the Plague. Diego is forced to flee the judge's house taking with him Victoria, his individual happiness.

Fear now completely overtakes Diego; he can think only of saving himself by running away. He turns from Victoria in

---

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 158. [14] *Ibid.*, p. 189. [15] *Ibid.*

fear and hatred, refusing her love. He decides to try to escape across the barbed wire and to join the other fugitives outside the city. But before Diego leaves Victoria, she pleads with him to understand that love is stronger than hatred and tyrants are. She warns him that his flight is only a pretext in order to avoid the most important struggle which is between himself and his own fear. She tells Diego that he is evading ". . . the one struggle that is truly arduous, the one victory of which you could be rightly proud. . . . The anguish that you have within yourself. Master that, and all the rest will follow."[16] Victoria goes on to explain that Diego's fear is caused by his devotion to self, and that no one is benefited by that type of freedom. Diego cries out against Victoria's pleas, "Why should I be singled out for this ordeal?"[17] Rejecting Victoria and her advice, he runs to the docks to escape.

But before he can escape, Death meets him on the wharf. When Diego finally faces Death, and when he realizes that there is no retreat from her, his fear disappears; he rebels by slapping her face. With his loss of fear he has conquered Death. She laughs and tells him that he has found the weak point in the Plague. "The machine has always shown a tendency to break down when a man conquers his fear and stands up to them. I won't say it stops completely. But it creaks, and

---

[16]Ibid., pp. 198-199. [17]Ibid., p. 199.

sometimes it actually begins to fold up."[18] Death moves slowly away from him. Diego, at last, begins to organize a rebellion to overthrow the Plague. He unties his fellow townsmen's gags so that they too can fearlessly speak out against this menace. They are now rebels and brothers in a fight against the Plague.

The Plague and Death try to buy off the rebels with concessions and appeasements with the promise of new powers of life and death over their fellow townsmen, but Diego refuses the bribe. The Plague cunningly offers Diego a compromise, Victoria and power, if Diego will return the city to the Plague's rule. But Diego refuses these satanic temptations; he chooses to die rather than to betray his love for his fellow citizens. He cannot accept his freedom at the expense of other men's liberties. His sacrifice frees the town of the Plague. The Plague moves on to another city with the parting threat that he will return in force someday when there are no more rebels to oppose him. The old forms of inefficient government return. Nada is furious; he loudly wails that there is no justice in any state. The chorus affirms Nada's remark; it now knows that there may be no justice ". . . but there are limits. And those who stand for no rule at all, no less than those who want to impose a rule for everything, overstep the limit."[19] Now that love and a

---

[18] _Ibid._, p. 207.

[19] _Ibid._, p. 231.

sense of justice with limits are present in the town, Nada commits suicide; he has no place in this society.

The women's chorus presents Camus' conclusion of the way to form a stable life-pattern in his morality play. The women conclude that the community can be saved by safeguarding the home where love should flourish. Then if war comes, man can undergo the hardships with the love of his neighbors to support him. But if man goes whoring after ideas, if he runs away from mother and love, he will find himself in an earthly hell which is caused by men who divorce themselves from human love in search of a cold abstract love of ideas. He

> . . . starts rushing upon adventure, wounded without a scar, slain without a dagger, a hunter of shadows or a lonely singer who invokes some impossible reunion under a silent sky, and makes his way from solitude to solitude, toward the final isolation, a death in the desert.[20]

He will find himself in the world of nihilism and the cold utopia of tyrannous government. The only way to avoid this cold dream of hell is for man to be transformed. Power, first, must be controlled within each man, and each man must struggle to overcome his own evil and must strive toward self-perfection. He must eliminate all temptations to rule over others. Love is the corrective view. As Tarrou states in The Plague, in this world without God, the problem is to learn how to become a saint. But Rieux's reply is that he does not want to be a

---

[20] Ibid., p. 229.

saint but a man; Rieux instinctively knows that sainthood removes one from the brotherhood of man. Man longs for unity and perfection; but if he is not careful, he accepts the ideal and refuses man. Somewhere, he must learn to settle for the golden mean. The twentieth century is a period that is looking for a "Grace" and a "Justice" without God.[21]

---

[21]Camus, The Rebel, p. 225.

CHAPTER V

THE JUST ASSASSINS

Camus named the second cycle "Prometheus: Cycle of Revolt" because Prometheus, in his attempt to help man, was a rebel against a god. Europe's history, in one sense, was a series of rebellions; "But to kill men leads to nothing but killing more men."[1] There was a need to re-evaluate this history and to see if one could find an answer which would lead to a way out of this *cul-de-sac* of murder and sacrifice.

Camus' research ended with the following conclusions:

> The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and unity.
> . . . .
> The insurrection against evil is, above all, a demand for unity. The rebel obstinately confronts a world condemned to death and the impenetrable obscurity of the human condition with his demand for life and absolute clarity. He is seeking without knowing it, a moral philosophy or a religion.
> . . . .
> It is not rebellion itself that is noble,

---

[1] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 109.

> But its aims, even though its achievements are at times ignoble.[2]

One must learn how to recognize rebellion, and when it turns to ignoble ends, to avoid them. It becomes ignoble when "it deifies the total rejection, the absolute negation, of what exists [and] each time that it blindly accepts what exists and gives voice to absolute assent."[3] In both cases when it resorts to absolutes, rebellion becomes nihilistic and destructive. Freedom and justice for man exist only within limits; these limits are destroyed when rebellion becomes revolution. In order to maintain each new government, more and more individual freedom has been lost with each revolution, and the rebel has become a Caesar ruling over cattle surrounded by barbed wire:

> Rebellion is, by nature, limited in scope. It is no more than an incoherent pronouncement. Revolution, on the contrary, originates in the realm of ideas. While even the collective history of a movement of rebellion is always that a fruitless struggle with facts, of an obscure protest which involves neither methods nor reasons, a revolucion is an attempt to shape actions to ideas, to fit the world into a theoretic frame. That is why rebellion kills men while revolution destroys both men and principles.[4]

Camus believed that the period of rebellion in history ended in 1793, when the French Revolution deposed God and put Reason in His place. And, with the Age of Reason, the period

---

[2] Ibid., p. 101. [3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 106.

of revolutions began. Since then Europe has been involved in revolutions for one hundred and fifty years.

In order to present his ideas of the rebel, Camus once again chose, as he had done in Caligula, an historical character to present his theories. In The Just Assassins he was able to pose the complex and ambiguous problem of the rebel in modern times. He found the script for this play in a diary written by a Russian terrorist, Boris Savinkov. The book describes the activities of a combat organization of the Socialist Party during the first years of this century.[5] In fact, Camus even retains much of the actual dialogue and the real name of the man who assassinated the Grand Duke Sergei, the Russian Minister of Justice, in 1905. Camus centered his theme on what he considered the only living religion in this century of masters and slaves, namely, freedom. But freedom itself had limits; there was no goodness or justice for man if he did not recognize these limits to his freedom.

In the historical events which occurred in Russia in 1905, Camus found the perfect example to represent his ideas of the rebel, or of Prometheus. Terrorists were martyrs of a revolutionary religion; "In the universe of total negation, these young disciples try with bombs and revolvers and also with the courage which they walk to the gallows, to escape from the contradiction and to create the values they

---

[5] Germaine Brée, Camus, rev. ed. (New York, 1964), p. 159.

lack."[6] They aimed "to create a community founded on love and justice"[7] once they had toppled the government, and "thus to resume a mission that the church had betrayed."[8]

With "O love! O life! not life, but love in death!" from Romeo and Juliet, Camus begins his ironic tale of the Rebel in The Just Assassins. The play is the story of "a pair of star-crossed lovers" who give their lives for an ideal. Dora and Kaliayev are innocents who believe that they can change their world into a better one; this pride of theirs brings about their downfall and death. Dora and Kaliayev belong to a combat group in the Socialist Revolutionary Party, and the incidents of the play portray Kaliayev's assassination of the Grand Duke Sergei and the aftermath, Kaliayev's imprisonment and his hanging.

The tale is filled with dramatic irony; the audience knows what becomes of Dora's and Kaliayev's ideals--they are perverted into the rationalizations of the Russian Communist credo. They sought the downfall of Czarist despotism for their people; instead, the utopia for which they give their lives will be pushed into some far-off future. Their demand for justice ends in injustice; they have lived and died for nothing.

Kaliayev is a young poet passionately in love with life; he bubbles over with emotions. He has joined the revolution

---

[6]Camus, The Rebel, p. 165.

[7]Ibid., p. 166. [8]Ibid.

because he wants everybody to be able to enjoy life with freedom and justice. He is willing to destroy the hated Czarist regime, and he hopes to help establish a utopia for his fellow Russians. His belief in the brotherhood of the Russian people and his willingness to sacrifice his life for his brothers justify his acts of terrorism. He will throw the bomb which will help to liberate his brothers, and then he will die. Kaliayev explains his views to Dora. He is

> . . . . convinced that life is a glorious thing. I'm in love with beauty, happiness. That's why I hate despotism. The trouble is to make them [his comrades] understand this. Revolution, by all means. But revolution for the sake of life--to give life a chance, if you see what I mean.[9]

Kaliayev defends his murder of the Grand Duke:

> When we kill, we're killing so as to build-up a world in which there will be no more killing. We consent to being criminals so that at last the innocent and only they, will inherit the earth.[10]

And when Dora asks him to suppose that his dream may not work out the way he has planned, Kaliayev refuses the possibility that his dream of a new world could fail. Dora warns Kaliayev that when he comes face to face with his victim, he will see, instead of a symbol of tyranny, a man; for a man is a man, not merely an abstraction. Kaliayev confidently

---

[9]Albert Camus, "The Just Assassins," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1958), p. 245.

[10]Ibid.

refuses all of Dora's warnings and replies: "It's not he I'm killing. I'm killing despotism. . . . I shall kill him. With Joy!"[11]

But the night comes when Kaliayev is to throw the bomb at the Grand Duke. In the carriage are two children. He hesitates; he cannot kill innocent victims. Kaliayev does not kill the Grand Duke, but instead he returns to the other waiting conspirators to receive their decision about his failure. Stepan, who represents the views of the future Communist credo, chastises Kaliayev for his decision. Kaliayev had been ordered to kill and nothing should have interfered with his orders; for all is allowed when one is trying to bring about a revolution. Kaliayev will not accept Stepan's assumptions of any means to accomplish their ends. He angrily answers:

> Stepan, I'm ashamed of myself--yet I cannot let you continue. I am ready to shed blood, so as to overthrow the present despotism. But behind your words, I see the threat of another despotism which, if ever it comes into power, will make of me a murderer--and what I want to be is a doer of justice, not a man of blood.[12]

Kaliayev cannot accept Stepan's idea that one can repudiate everything in order to build for a future. For Kaliayev, there is only one generation--his. It is for today that he is fighting, not for some future tomorrow. He refuses to add to the living injustice all around him for the sake of

---

[11] Ibid., p. 248.

[12] Ibid., p. 259.

some justice which he never can be sure will exist. The other conspirators agree with Kaliayev's decision of not killing innocent bystanders, saying that one should conserve life and kill only the immediate danger. The assassination is cancelled until they can find the Grand Duke alone. Two nights later Kaliayev kills the Grand Duke.

But during the interim Kaliayev is very depressed; during his "dress rehearsal" he had discovered that to kill for an idea is not so simple as it had seemed. Dora was right; the Grand Duke was not an abstract principle to be destroyed, but a man of flesh and blood. It is at this point that Kaliayev chooses wrongly; he refuses to turn back from his path of destruction. He deliberately decides to follow his idea through by killing the man, hoping that by sacrificing his own life immediately afterwards he himself will be brought from hatred back into the world of love. But Dora warns him that there is nothing beyond hatred, and she points out the mistake that she and Kaliayev have made. There are two types of love: one kind is what they have, "an absolute ideal love, a pure and solitary joy";[13] the other is a simple human love. Dora begs Kaliayev to reject their cold, half-frozen, abstract love of mankind before it is too late and to love her simply. In her heart, Dora knows that this abstract love for mankind is impossible and that

---

[13] _Ibid._, p. 269.

the only love is human love for individuals. They have become so entangled with words, mere symbols of non-existent ideals, that they are rejecting real life. Kaliayev does not heed her, filled as he is with thoughts about the murder; he brutally tells her to "Keep quiet!"[14] He believes that they are committed to this action and can see no turning back.

Mistakenly, Kaliayev and Dora have isolated themselves from the community of men by their act of murder; Dora is equally guilty with Kaliayev, having made the bomb. She acknowledges the closing of the last door to their freedom:

> It's never-ending winter here. We don't belong to the world of men. We are the just ones. And outside there is warmth and light; but not for us, never for us! Ah, pity on the just![15]

Kaliayev agrees with Dora, but he will doggedly follow the plan. "Yes, that's our lot on earth; love is . . . impossible. But I shall kill the Grand Duke, and then at last there will be peace for you and me."[16]

After Kaliayev's trial and execution, Dora has full awareness of what their acts have accomplished--nothing. She knows that they have chosen wrongly; the right decision would have meant life and happiness together. The moment that their rebellion ended in murder, they were removed from the community of men and ended their lives:

---

[14] Ibid., p. 271.

[15] Ibid., p. 272.

[16] Ibid.

> With the first murder youth ends forever. One throws a bomb and in the next second a whole lifetime flashes by, and all that remains is death.[17]

Dora and Kaliayev had mistakenly substituted an impossible ideal for human love. First, one must learn to control the evil within himself and to love what is around him. There is no short way to justice that does not lead to injustice and enslavement of others. Camus concludes in The Rebel that this is the tragedy of the rebel. He revolts against an injustice done him and others. He tells his masters that there are limits which are to be respected. He can not allow them to make of him a slave, nor will he allow suffering and injustice to be done to his brothers. He is awakened to his unity with all men; he knows he must help them, even if they do not want his help. He will awaken their need for love and respect; and he will give them the gift of freedom and justice. If the masses will not accept his gospel, and if they do not welcome his sacrifices done in their behalf, the rebel develops scorn for them, and he proceeds to force his religion of man upon them. For the god of history, he builds his church of barbed wire and concentration camps in order to protect his fold. He, who was to deliver mankind from oppression, becomes a Caesar.

---

[17] Ibid., p. 296.

Dora and Kaliayev were the martyrs of this new religion; and Stepan and future commissars will erect their church around their sacrifice of love:

> The demand for justice ends in injustice if it is not primarily based on an ethical justification of justice; without this, crime itself one day becomes a duty. When good and evil are reintegrated in time and confused with events, nothing is any longer good or bad, but only either premature or out of date.[18]

Camus stresses that history does not provide a good foundation for basic ethics. Ethics based on history will lead only to tyranny. This century is one where many men deny God and any moral judgment. They reserve the right to be their own judges over their actions. An action that a man might consider subjectively inoffensive or even advantageous for the future of justice may in reality become harmful; and he is culpable out of the innocence of his rationalizations of what is right or wrong. The tragic modern fallacy is that, without God, each man has become his own judge and can twist the facts any way he wishes. To Camus this century has become a court of trial where man constantly presents his case to the audience of his peers and to the jurors of the future. Today one might be guilty; but tomorrow, when the case is reviewed, he may be reprieved.

Kaliayev was guilty in 1905, but today in Russia he might be considered a saint. In The Fall Camus was to

---

[18] Camus, The Rebel, p. 209.

present this view of a circular hell, in which judgment was always put off until some future date and in which the culprit longed for a policeman to pronounce sentence; and he draws his own John-the-Baptist preaching to all men their culpability in their acceptance of self-judgment, a prophet longing for a Christ who never returns.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Camus apparently saw the twentieth century as one of tragedy; certain values within his culture were being lost, changed, or destroyed. The main symptom of these events was the widespread acceptance of nihilistic attitudes. And since he equated nihilism with death, the use of the death metaphor became his symbol of this tragedy.

His century was a culmination of changes in his culture that had begun in the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason. Scientific enlightenment seemed to negate all beliefs in God. For some people, the emptiness was replaced by a new religion--that of man--and they marched toward an earthly utopia; others filled the void with a belief in power. Both groups ended their philosophies with the excuse that history ruled and decided the courses of men's lives. But most Europeans were filled with apathy and a belief in nothing; they wandered in a _cul-de-sac_ of black emptiness.

Camus assumed that one of the basic causes of the tragedy was "placing history on the throne of God, [and] . . . progressing toward theocracy like those whom the Greeks called

Barbarians and whom they fought to death in the waters of Salamis."[1] Europe had finally defeated the Greeks, at Salamis and now the Barbarians rule. Instead of being like the Greeks who had a positive moral code where values exist before all action and set the limits of each action, European man has placed himself in this dilemma because

> modern philosophy places its values at the end of action. They are not but are becoming, and we shall know them fully only at the completion of history. With values, all limit disappears, and since conceptions differ as to what they will be, since all struggles, without the brake of those same values, spread indefinitely, today's Messianisms confront one another and their clamors mingle in the clash of empires. Disproportion is a conflagration, according to Heraclitus. The conflagration is spreading; Nietzsche is outdistanced. Europe no longer philosophizes by striking a hammer, but by shooting a cannon.[2]

To clarify one of the basic causes of the acceptance of such a large number of negative attitudes within his culture, Camus cites Hegel:

> . . . One must turn to him among our philosophers who is the true rival of Plato. "Only the modern city," Hegel dares write, "Offers the mind a field in which it can become aware of itself." We are thus living in the period of big cities. Deliberately, the world has been amputated of all that constitutes its permanence: nature, the sea, hilltops, evening meditation. Consciousness is to be found only in the streets--this is the edict. . . . History explains neither the

---

[1]Albert Camus, "Helen's Exile," in The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1955), p. 135.

[2]Ibid., p. 136.

> natural universe that existed before it nor the beauty that exists above it. Hence it chose to be ignorant of them. Whereas Plato contained everything--nonsense, reason, and myth--our philosophers contain nothing but nonsense or reason because they have closed their eyes to the rest. The mole is meditating.[3]

Science and the change from an agrarian society to a complex urban society have alienated man from his culture; anomy[4] exists in large segments of the population. Because of this anomy, the twentieth century has been characterized by a sickness of the spirit, by nihilism, and by the feeling of absurdity. Camus maintained the only exit through the absurd walls within which modern European man has enclosed himself is by recognizing two problems, nihilism and scientific socialism; man must analyze these problems, come to terms with them, understand them for what they are, and then find a solution. Camus saw clearly that if European culture were to survive, these negative elements must be uprooted. A society which invents and does not control lethal customs is

---

[3] Ibid., pp. 135-136.

[4] "Anomy is the disease of the disintegrating or reconstituting civilization. It occurs when drastic change causes moral orders to lose their bonding and motivating effect, or when segments of the population are left behind--alienated because no satisfying place exists for them in the changing social structure. The resulting anomy is marked by '. . . the retreat of the individual into his own ego, the skeptical rejection of all social bonds. . . . It signifies the state of mind of one who has been pulled up from his moral roots, who no longer has any standards but only disconnected urges, who no longer has any sense of continuity; of folk, of obligations.'" E. Adamson Hoebel, Anthropology: The Study of Man, 3rd edition (New York, 1966), p. 529.

doomed. A "meaning of life" and a motivation for survival must be sought to replace what has been lost. This was the work to which Camus dedicated himself. He began by trying to understand a meaning to life through a search for a meaning in death. He decided that one can either accept a positive attitude toward death and look for what will make it meaningful, or one can accept a negative attitude toward death and hence destroy any meaningful life functionings.

First Camus turned to the problem of suicide in the Sisyphean cycle. It was imperative to know what view to have of the world and what meaning there could be for life. He searched for the basic elements contained within nihilism and found them to be apathy and habit. In The Stranger Meursault too late realizes that he has negated his life by not placing any value on human life. The cause of his tragedy was that he falsely thought it was of little consequence whether or not he killed the Arab. In Caligula the emperor makes the same mistake as Meursault. Caligula, by negating everything that makes life meaningful, in truth, kills himself by allowing the assassination to take place. In The Misunderstanding the mother through her indifference allows the murders to be committed. And in concluding his cycle on suicide in "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus rejected the philosophies of existentialism which he believed negate life. At this point he could not give any reason why he was right

and these philosophers were wrong, but he knew that the important thing was to live in harmony with the universe and to love it in all its diversity.

In the second cycle, which followed the Second World War, Camus presented the individual who was not allowed to make a choice to accept or to reject life, whose will unfortunately was often subject to that of the group. For Camus the imperative now was for man to learn how to be a social animal:

> I do not think that man is by nature a social animal. To tell the truth, I think just the reverse. But I believe, and this is quite different, that he cannot live henceforth outside of society, whose laws are necessary to his physical survival. Hence the responsibilities must be established by society itself according to a reasonable and workable scale. But the law's final justification is in the good it does or fails to do to the society of a given place and time.[5]

The second cycle was a search for what constituted justice; and in an age of murderers who can justify their acts by rationalizing, Camus concluded that man must find some means of establishing a positive society without the aid of either "Justice" or "Grace." He found that principles of both "Justice" and "Grace" can be twisted to fit any definition; they were no longer a reliable basis for a positive ethic which would allow men to lead meaningful lives. Therefore he concluded that the basic fact was man. He saw that

---

[5]Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine," in Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York, 1960), p. 134.

it was necessary for man to get away from abstractions and confront

> . . . the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally. When a Spanish bishop blesses political executions, he ceases to be a bishop or a Christian or even a man; he is a dog just like the one who, backed by an ideology, orders that execution without doing the dirty work himself. We are still waiting, and I am waiting, for a grouping of all those who refuse to be dogs and are resolved to pay the price that must be paid so that man can be something more than a dog.[6]

Camus concluded that "we are faced with evil"[7] and that a society can be evil if a man does nothing to correct it. But attempts at correction can lead also to evil. Thus Camus saw the necessity to develop his philosophy of limits. The only way to reduce evil was not to add to it; the discussion of ways to avert and not add to the existing evil within society would have constituted Camus' third cycle, concerning Nemesis, goddess of limits.

In The Plague a few men led by the doctor attempt to assuage the ills of their society. Finally, the disease recedes, but Rieux, the doctor, knows it will return, and all he can do is to record their attempts to defend their city against plague in hopes it might help others. In State

---

[6] Albert Camus, "The Unbeliever and Christians," in Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, pp. 53-54.

[7] Ibid., p. 55.

of Siege, Diego finds that it is necessary to fight the Plague; but the biggest temptation, after winning the battle against one form of tyranny, is for him to become a form of the Plague. Diego recognizes that he himself must shun Caesarism. The most important thing to him is to be allowed to make his own decisions about his happiness and freedom. He rebelled for this end; but he knows also that he cannot make these same decisions for other men. He would rather die than detract from another man's selfhood. The Plague can be contained by rebels who respect life and who refuse to let others destroy it.

In The Just Assassins, the example of Russia, which rapidly changed from a feudal agrarian society to a modern urban one, shows how nihilism can destroy a society. Russia made the transition from nihilism to military socialism in the manner explained by the policeman, talking to Kaliayev in his prison cell: "One begins by wanting justice--and one ends by setting up a police force."[8] Kaliayev wants to pay for his crime with his life, for he recognizes the limits of his action. When he killed the Grand Duke, he separated himself from the society of men; and the world would have been loathsome to him if he did not die, thereby establishing those values in which he believed:

---

[8]Albert Camus, "The Just Assassins," in Caligula and Three Other Plays, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1958), p. 281.

> Murder is thus a desperate exception or it is nothing. The disturbance that it brings to the order of things offers no hope of a future; it is an exception and therefore it can be neither utilitarian nor systematic as the purely historical attitude would have it. It is the limit that can be reached but once, after which one must die. The rebel has only one way of reconciling himself with his act of murder if he allows himself to be led into performing it: to accept his own death and sacrifice. He kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible. He demonstrates that, in reality, he prefers "We are" to the "We shall be." The calm happiness of Kaliayev in his prison, the serenity of Saint-Just when he walks toward the scaffold, are explained in their turn. Beyond that farthest frontier, contradiction and nihilism begin.[9]

Only by his death could Kaliayev expiate his crime and hope for peace. In The Rebel, absolute freedom is shown to be impossible; it is an abstraction. By Caligula's similar quest for the moon and Martha's longing for the land of the south, the passionate search for absolute freedom leads only to the path of destruction. What man in a society must learn is that every human freedom at its roots is relative. The only lasting value is man himself.

Camus evaluated his thirteen-year search for truth in his time: Man must learn to face the reality of death and have this awareness give a meaning to his life. He must learn to take the responsibility for his own life "with all its weight of errors and greatness."[10]

---

[9]Albert Camus, The Rebel, translated by Anthony Bower (New York, 1956), p. 282.

[10]Camus, "The Wager of Our Generation," in Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, p. 184.

Camus completed his search by preaching of a renaissance for Europe. He felt that man's morals could be recreated, as he had recreated his own personal values from the death-throes of negativism. In a speech delivered in Sweden shortly before his death, he explained his main thoughts about this awakening of modern man's morals:

> Some will say that this hope [of a renaissance] lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every man on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys, builds for all.[11]

This passage in a sense concludes Camus' search for the significance of his living, dying, and writing. Camus had built "on the foundations of his own sufferings and joys" a world of hope for all.

---

[11] Camus, "Create Dangerously," in Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, p. 209.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrett, William, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy, Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1962.

Brée, Germaine, Albert Camus, New York, Columbia University Press, 1964.

______________, Camus, revised edition, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1964.

______________, editor, Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

______________ and Margaret Guiton, The French Novel from Gide to Camus, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962.

Camus, Albert, Caligula and Three Other Plays, translated by Stuart Gilbert, New York, Random House, 1958.

______________, Exile and the Kingdom, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Random House, 1965.

______________, The Fall, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Random House, 1956.

______________, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Random House, 1955.

______________, Notebooks 1935-1942, translated by Philip Thody, New York, Random House, 1965.

______________, The Plague, translated by Stuart Gilbert, New York, Random House, 1948.

______________, The Possessed: A Play in Three Parts, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Random House, 1960.

Camus, Albert, The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt, translated by Anthony Bower, New York, Random House, 1956.

______________, Resistance, Rebellion, and Death, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Random House, 1960.

______________, The Stranger, translated by Stuart Gilbert, New York, Random House, 1946.

Corrigan, Robert W., editor, Tragedy, Vision, and Form, San Francisco, Chandler Publishing Company, 1965.

Grene, Marjorie, Introduction to Existentialism, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948.

Hanna, Thomas, The Thought and Art of Albert Camus, Chicago, Henry Regnery Co., 1958.

Hoebel, E. Adamson, Anthropology: The Study of Man, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966.

Kaufman, Walter, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, New York, The World Publishing Company, 1965.

de Luppe, Robert, Albert Camus, translated by John Cumming and J. Hargreaves, New York, Funk and Wagnalls, 1966.

Maquet, Albert, Albert Camus: The Invincible Summer, translated by Herma Briffault, New York, George Braziller, Inc., 1958.

Nietzsche, Friedrich, The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals, translated by Francis Golffing, New York, Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1956.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, Literary and Philosophical Essays, translated by Annette Michelson, New York, Criterion Books, Inc., 1955.

Scott, Nathan, Albert Camus, London, Bowes and Bowes, 1962.

Thody, Philip, Albert Camus: A Study of His Work, New York, Grove Press, Inc., 1957.