

Depriving the Symbol of Its Power:  
The Dissolution of Meaning in Albert Camus's "Cycle of the Absurd"

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Albert Camus's "cycle of the absurd," including the three works, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger* and *Caligula* follow a narrative pattern where the protagonist falls into alienation from the world through destructive, yet necessary, external forces, such as the sun, a rock, and the moon. He then achieves a state of joy within the scorn of the world and mastery over the mind. The natural forces, depicted as symbols that illicit a disconnected emotion in the protagonist and the reader, dissolve into the character within the conclusion of each text as the absurd hero has an inward awakening. Meursault's feelings, Caligula's despair, and Sisyphus's frustration, each depict an absurd world in which characters invest themselves in external objects that they read as having symbolic power. These external realities create tension in the hero and the reader through their fluctuation of meaning, but by the conclusion of each text, the hero withdraws from his slavery to unexplainable, yet all-encompassing symbols. So, in these three texts, the protagonists dwell in the slavery to their surroundings, experience an absence of the symbols that previously governed their emotions, and then find comfort in alienation. This contentment is driven by their rejection of the objects' dominance, and implicitly, Camus's rejection of symbolic power. Meursault detaches from the sun, Sisyphus from the rock, and Caligula from the moon, showing that Camus critically undermines meaning and belief in a totalizing structure by showing the slavish allegiance these characters demonstrate in reading the world symbolically. As each abandons the symbols they once elected, each enters the realm of the consciousness afforded through an awareness of the absurd.

The "cycle of the absurd," one of the few sets of literature published in France during World War II, departs from the reliance on symbol that pervades French literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Symbolism, once rooted in the French Symbolist tradition and all of Western literature, focuses on finding meaning from signs, making purpose of the world, and reading the external world as symbolic of one's inner experience. In Arthur Symons's book, *The Symbolist Movement in*

*Literature*, he focuses largely on the necessary expression of symbol in 19<sup>th</sup> century French publications. Symons praises the symbol and notes that the symbol serves as the meaningful salvation within literature:

In this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual. (Symons 9)

Unlike Symons and previous symbolist literature, Camus critiques the pertinence of the symbol in literature, in his fictional expression of absurdity, through highlighting the death, or the metaphysical suicide, that takes place when humans divest themselves into iconic religion in order to resolve the absurdity of existence. For Camus, the belief in God results in the death of the search for meaning within the unexplainable world, or the death of the absurd characterized through specific emblems. So instead, Camus expresses the value of absurdity, and the inefficacy of the literary symbol. He once wrote, “Being able to remain on that dizzying crest—that is the integrity and the rest is subterfuge” (Camus 50). In other words, answers prove illusory, and definitive symbols signal an artistic weakness.

As Symon’s and many authors of the Romantic period, such as Charles Baudelaire, viewed the symbol as a religious icon within literature, Camus likens such religious belief as philosophical suicide. According to one English translation of Baudelaire’s poem, *Correspondences*, he states, “Man wanders among symbols in those glades/ Where all things watch him with familiar eyes....Huge as the night or as the light of day,/ All scents and sounds and colors meet as one./

And of an infinite pervasiveness,...The ecstasies of sense, the soul's delight" (Baudelaire 7-14).

Viewing the world symbolically, Baudelaire communicates a sense of ecstasy. Camus, on the other hand, undermines this truth by eliminating belief in symbolic meaning. Ultimately, he guides his absurd heroes into a triumphant calm by eliminating their signifiers.

The inspiration of sacred ritual, noted by Symons above, and invoked through the totality of the symbol's meaning in literature reflects what Camus views as a leap away from the search for meaning, or philosophical suicide. In the appendix to *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus declares a tendency towards religious excess in literature as the role of external objects invoke character sensations. In his analysis of the work of Franz Kafka, he critiques the all-encompassing truth of signs that Baudelaire embraces. He argues,

A symbol, indeed, assumes two planes, two worlds of ideas and sensation, and a dictionary of correspondences between them....There is in the human condition (and this is a commonplace of all literatures) a basic absurdity as well as an implacable nobility. The two coincide, as is natural. Both of them are represented, let me repeat, in the ridiculous divorce separating our spiritual excesses and the ephemeral joys of the body. The absurd thing is that it should be the soul of this body which it transcends so inordinately. (Camus 126-7)

Camus argues that the soul must command influence over the symbol, so as not to lead to Baudelaire's illogical affection for "correspondences" or what Camus would call "spiritual excess." He carries this idea out in the "cycle of the absurd" by having the characters gain strength internally, within "the soul of the body," to trump the world of signs and images.

A familiar example of Camus's absurdism, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942, shows the potential of symbolic influence on Camus's absurd heroes through Sisyphus, who must

continuously roll a giant boulder up a mountain only to see it roll back down before he reaches the top. Verena Kast notes that “The solid and almost changeless character of the stone renders it a symbol of firmness and immutability and thus also of reliability,” in her book, *Sisyphus: The Old Stone, A New Way* (Kast 49). The rock, an external object that most modernist critics would analyze as a symbol within the myth, is ultimately defeated by the power of Sisyphus’s mind. Camus concludes that “Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks,” proving that the rock’s immutability cannot defeat the Sisyphus’s human consciousness (Camus 123).

Camus’s version of the myth builds off of Homer’s description in *The Odyssey*, where Camus recaps the story,

Aegina, the daughter of Aesopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that Aesopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. (Camus 119)

Here, water, another external element, initially masters Sisyphus, and acts as a symbol for the desire for an earthly existence. Camus characterizes water as having a “benediction” rather than a human necessity, revealing his animosity to the individual’s reliance on the external world. Because of a series of events invoked by his slavery to the natural world, the desire for water, Sisyphus must live in constant turmoil with his rock in hell. From here, Sisyphus obtains permission from Pluto to return to earth and discipline his wife for burying his body against his will. Once again, Sisyphus submits to the images of earth and water, symbols of earth that blind him to his present reality in hell. Camus comments, “But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun,

warm stones and the sea, he no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness” (Camus 120).

The cause of Sisyphus’s condemned destiny directs back to his dependence on images, the sight of the sun and water.

The water drives his disobedience, and acts as a direct cause for his condemnation.

Although the need for water acts as a plausible cause for the human to return, Sisyphus has already been condemned to hell, where he no longer bears bodily requirements. In the article, “Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience,” Cecil L. Eubanks and Peter A. Petrakis argue that Camus uses the “deconstruction and reconstruction of symbols [as] his examination of rebellion” (Eubanks 309). Sisyphus’s situation in hell demonstrates a revolt against present condition for the images of earth, where the power of the symbol is fully reconstructed, but then Camus deconstructs the rock’s dominance of the rock as he overcomes it’s burden in the final words of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he declares Sisyphus happy. In this reconstruction and deconstruction, he also exemplifies a critique of the consistently static symbol in literature.

In the philosophical portion of *Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus discusses the world and our constant reminder of absurdity, or the human pursuit of meaning where none is given. External reality has an enveloping effect on Camus’s expression of the human condition because of human desire to connect with or understand the world completely. During the section titled “Absurd Walls,” Camus comments,

And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste. These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings when the heart relaxes—how shall I negate this world whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine (Camus 19).

Reason cannot explain the wealth of experience gained from water and light, yet we also inherently seek reason behind our experiences. He continues, “But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know” (Camus 20). Here, Camus points out how images in life, similar component to the symbols in literature, help us to “imagine” an understanding and supply a false need for rational explanations, but never truly cure the absurdity, or supply the answer to existence.

Camus’s use of the power of symbolic meaning revolutionized from his early works dependency on symbolism to the “cycle of the absurd.” In a New York Times article released in 1968, John Weightman discusses Camus’s early works in his collection, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*. He describes them by noting that

there is a constant suggestion that no common measure exists between man and the world around him; individuals grow old and lonely, and their pathetic little preoccupations are out of all proportion to the sea and the desert, those ever-present symbols of the mystery of infinite time and space. (Weightman)

Here, Sisyphus contrasts with Camus’s early protagonists by overcoming his preoccupation with “ever-present” symbols marking a change in Camus’s delivery of symbolic power. By the time he wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and the other works in the “cycle of the absurd,” he transformed the narrative arch into highlighting the separation of meaning within the literary symbol. Camus’s alteration within the story line proves a deliberate shift where he creates a similar outcome in the three texts that make up the “cycle of the absurd.”

By choosing elements of nature as initial symbols in the “cycle of the absurd,” Camus initially presents external conditions that supply emotion for the absurd heroes and the reader,

which defines T. S. Eliot's idea of the "objective correlative." But rather than creating characters who explain their emotions, Camus presents objects that satisfy or violate the characters sensory experience. T. S. Eliot, a Romantic symbolist, elaborates on the definition of the "objective correlative," in the essay, "Hamlet and His Problems," by noting that

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." (Eliot 142)

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus scorns his set of objects, detaches from the rock, loses hope of regaining his natural pleasures of the earth, and gains the mastery over his own consciousness. Thus, the rock's dominance over his fate dissolves, and he becomes aware of his own ability to control his thoughts. He abandons his hope. In Camus's essay, he critiques the notion of "hope" as a form of unsubstantiated escape, where "in a closed universe limited to the human, [philosophers] deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them...I can call it a leap" (Camus 32-3). Sisyphus abandons his hope, and abandons his pseudo religion, in order to find his happiness. The absence of the symbols of earth naturally brings despair for Sisyphus, but his own consciousness acts to soothe him, overcoming the external objective that corresponds to his emotion. Camus quoted Nietzsche in an interview in 1959 to emphasize the ability of the mind in giving one strength in times of adversity. Nietzsche wrote, "Within a superabundance of life-giving and restoring forces, even misfortunes have a sunlike glow and engender their own consolation" (Camus 365). The capacity of the mind



nourishes Sisyphus, alive in hell, to find the strength of consciousness to abandon his dependence on the rock.

Where traditional literature puts the symbol on a pedestal as a device to evoke feeling in fiction, Camus's works exemplify the symbol's convergence with emotion as a deviation from actual human experience. T. Eliot notes an artistic problem in Hamlet's absurd reactions, where "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (Eliot 61). By blaming Hamlet's excessive emotion on the artistic creation of Shakespeare, Eliot makes the assumption that characters in respectable literature need an external correspondent to convey their emotions. Camus demonstrates, however, the transformation of the objective correlative into a subjective consciousness in the absurd hero, so that the external world of symbols is devoured by the awareness of the individual. In turn, he proves that the notion of the "objective correlative" represents a philosophical suicide and ignores the honest representation of the human's absurd experience.

Camus argues for Sisyphus's happiness in his version of the myth because he had finally become master of his own destiny. Camus writes, "He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile" (Camus 123). Here, "master" can be likened to the emotionally definitive "symbol." With the loss of his emotional identification to a particular image of earth, or the dissolution of symbol meaning within his mind, Sisyphus is liberated. Just as Sisyphus frees himself from the formal elements of his own myth, his character exemplifies the indeterminacy of symbols as objectives correlatives that consistently suggest a specific emotion.

Camus concludes by drawing a smile upon Sisyphus as he reconciles his alienated state through the rejection and deconstruction of his objective correlatives. He learns to scorn the natural world and become internally involved with his actions, thus determining his personal choice of emotion. In the case of Sisyphus, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Camus 123). Leaving the images of the earth behind, he instead chooses consciousness. In hell, the water, the warm stones and the sea are absent, yet the giant boulder masters his being. With the depressing image of turmoil constantly in front of him, Sisyphus’s ruling symbol dissolves and he resorts to his ability to make the best of an ill-fated situation.

David Ellison, author of *Understanding Albert Camus*, psychoanalytically characterizes the shift from the external to the internal, and comments,

This ‘happiness’ is not frivolous contentment, of course, but rather the deeper pleasure one attains in understanding one’s fate and in achieving an intellectual mastery over the physical conditions that seemed at first to be all-encompassing and all-constraining. (Ellison 72-3)

Here, Ellison refers to the transition away from the rock for Sisyphus as an “intellectual mastery.” Eliot wrote in his essay, “Hamlet and His Problems” that “the artistic ‘inevitability’ lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion” (Eliot). However, for Sisyphus, the external world will not satisfy his emotion, as shown when he detaches from the rock to find happiness. Thus, Camus undermines Eliot’s argument by proving that the objective correlative is artistically avoidable. Sisyphus accepts his part within the unpredictability of nature, narrows his focus, and dispels his external symbols into images of himself as “he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory’s eye and soon sealed by his death” (Camus 123). In realizing that the existence of his consciousness and his ability to

choose his images are just as unexplainable as the world that surrounds him, he negates the alienated symbolism of earth and expels them from his effort to find happiness, thus negating their power in narrative.

*The Stranger*, Camus's novel within the cycle, exemplifies the same ejection of symbolic meaning in Meursault, the absurd hero. The novel revolves around three deaths: Meursault's mother, an Arab, and Meursault himself, each separated by five chapters. The book is structured within a symmetrical proportion where the murder of the Arab occurs directly in the middle of the text. Prior to the murder, Meursault refuses to acknowledge the absurdity of existence, by allowing external elements to take charge of his life. After he is confined to prison, however, he opens himself "to the gentle indifference of the world," and thus finds solace in a conscious revolt against meaning (Camus 122). Meursault evolves from holding an absent philosophy or belief system to revolting against the acknowledgment of external beliefs. By the end, he transforms his indifference into functioning awareness of life within the prison cell and thus revolts against the absurd by finding meaning in solitary actions deficient of symbolism.

Camus uses the destructive force of the sun in *The Stranger* as the dictating symbol in the first part of the novel to symbolize Meursault's alienation. Once again, as Meursault undergoes an awakening, the effects of the sun disappear and he clings to images of himself as his own object in the world rather than the images of his environment. S. Beynon John notes in his article, "Image and Symbol in the Work of Albert Camus," that

Meursault is the symbol of man perpetually estranged in the world and this conception is reinforced when Camus, lending the sun this potent destructive influence, absolves man from responsibility...reducing him to something less than man, to the status of an irresponsible element in nature. (John 138)

Here, John reads both the sun and Meursault as symbols of estrangement within the novel. Camus expresses the negativity that dominating symbols have on Meursault by the immorality this alienation brings about in Meursault. He commits a murder. Also, we never discover Meursault's real name, his appearance, or when the narrative takes place. Meursault withholds information about his past and the environment where he lives and works as well proving the overwhelming dominance the world of symbol has over his character. In turn, the protagonist undergoes a loss of his personal will, submitting exclusively to the contextual experiences dominated by the confines of symbolism.

The symbolism of the sun arrests Meursault's will to interpret life. During his encounter with the Arab, prior to his imprisonment, Meursault states, "The light shot off the steel and it was like a long flashing blade cutting at my forehead...The scorching blade slashed at my eyelashes and stabbed at my stinging eyes...The trigger gave" (Camus 59). By using the sun as a symbol outside of Meursault's consciousness and a carrier violent power, Camus reduces Meursault's role as a human to an irresponsible slave to his objective correlative. However, this attitude dominates Meursault only in the first part of the novel. Prior to imprisonment, Meursault is a slave to the heat of the sun and, in turn, he suffers. Although he never explicitly reveals a certain emotion, his attitude to the strength of the sun reveals the inner turmoil of his physicality. A moment before killing the Arab, Meursault reveals,

The sun was the same as it had been the day I'd buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning, which I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward (Camus 58-9).

For Meursault, the sun does not shine; it burns. His prescribed symbol defeats him. As he walks towards the Arab in order to get closer to the spring, and quench his thirst, the sun transforms him into a beast seeking his needs. Here, the sun acts as a symbol for Meursault's lack of satisfaction, a symbol that results in the turmoil of his incapacity.

Meursault finds purpose during his exile because he learns to calm the effects of his environment through his thoughts. If he lets the power of hope dominate his thoughts, the effects of the sun manage to seep into and damage his consciousness. Prior to his appeal in court, he thinks,

I had to accept the rejection of my appeal. Then and only then would I have the right, so to speak—would I give myself permission, as it were—to consider the alternative hypothesis: I was pardoned. The trouble was that I would somehow have to cool the hot blood that would suddenly surge through my body and sting my eyes with delirious joy. It would take all my strength to quiet my heart, to be rational. (Camus 108)

In this moment, the sun's heat comes back inside him because he has an implausible flash of hope. When he blames the sun for his actions in court and is still convicted, he realizes that the sun does not rule him and that he is responsible for himself. As he leaves the last session of the Court of Assizes, he remembers "The cries of the newspaper vendors in the already languid air, the last few birds in the square, the shouts of the sandwich sellers, the screech of the streetcars turning sharply through the upper town, and that hum in the sky before night engulfs the port" (Camus 97). Like Sisyphus, Meursault recalls images of the earth stored in his memories, yet now he is unable to rely on these to rule his emotions. As his active existence with the world shifts to memories existing in his head, he gains power to control the images that rule him. With the sun primarily existing in his

memory, Meursault realizes he must find means to calm the effect that the external world has on him and notes in the final chapters,

I had been looking at the stones in these walls for months. There wasn't anything or anyone in the world I knew better. Maybe one time, way back, I had searched for a face in them. But the face I was looking for was as bright as the sun and the flame of desire (Camus 119).

In efforts to recall images of the earth, the sun symbolically blinds him, and he learns *not* to seek images that lie outside his reality. He refuses his prior search for the sun, his primary symbol, and calms himself through the consciousness of the present moment, which works to show a critique of the symbol's power over any character in literature and their emotions.

By the end of *The Stranger*, Meursault finds happiness by letting go of the images that used to rule his sensations, such as the sun, the sea, and Marie. During his time in prison in Part II of the novel, the prison Chaplain visits him and attempts to seduce Meursault into turning to God for help. Meursault's anger unleashes for the first time in the novel as he realizes the grip a metaphysical reality has over the Chaplain.

He seemed so certain about everything, didn't he? ...But I was sure about me, about everything, surer than he could ever be, sure of my life and sure of the death I had waiting for me. Yes, that was all I had. But at least I had as much of a hold on it as it had on me" (Camus 120-1).

Like Sisyphus, the objective correlatives that previously ruled Meursault's actions, sensations, and reactions such as the sun and the sea have shifted inward. From this point on in the novel, the facticity of his own death and the actuality of his present life dictate his awareness. No longer a slave to the perception of the outside world, Camus doesn't mention the sun in Meursault's closing

statements. He does, however, refer to the sea. “The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide” (Camus 122). Now, the sea represents a flow of emotion that lives inside him. Rather than giving him comfort and pleasure when he was near the ocean in the first half of the novel, now he feels the tides inside him, living there, until he dies. Thus, he transforms the external symbolism into a subjective aspect of himself.

Once again, the objective correlative for the absurd hero undergoes a subjective turn and also disputes the origins of the term, “objective correlative,” whose appearance dates back to Newman’s Sermon titled “Love the Safeguard of Faith against Superstition.” Newman defines the “objective correlative” through the identification of an external object. In his sermon, Newman noted, “the divinely enlightened mind sees in Christ the very object whom it desires to love and worship—the Objective correlative of its own affections; and it trusts him, or believes from loving him” (Cowley 320). Eliot referenced the work of Newman when he spoke of Lancelot Andrewes sermons concerning his praise of the direct connection between emotion and its object. “Andrewes’s emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate; his emotion is wholly contained in and explained by its object” (Cowley 321). For the character of Meursault, the religious origins of external images verify the abandonment his attachment to symbolic earthly images and conditions after his horrific frustration with the Chaplain.

Following the violent outburst against Christianity, Meursault abandons his previous set of forces that empowered his existence, for they no longer play a role in his life. Meursault states:

Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it

passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time in years no more real than the ones I was living. (Camus 121)

Here, Meursault, the absurd hero, acknowledges that the wind has passed, or that the external effect of the world is no longer consequential for his life, which proves his conscious retreat away from the external world and his character's symbolism. When Meursault continues to comment on his anger, he thinks, "As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world" (Camus 122). He characterizes the night as "alive with signs" or, in other words, alive with images that he is meant to derive meaning from, but he also admits his apathy of external reality. Thus, he rises above the allusions and connections of symbols as he realizes their existence is indifferent towards his own. Like Sisyphus, complete separation from imposed value and power makes Meursault happy. He embraces his disconnection with others, and separates himself from the search for meaning by being conscious within his "struggle towards the heights," rather than blinded by the heat of the sun. His awakening quoted above comes from a lack of concern for the formal elements of his life. By concluding in a state of happiness while living in exile in a prison cell, Meursault proves that the outside world that previously governed his level of contentment actually holds a limited power over the authority of his own mind. Alone, Meursault understands that his existence unveils as an isolated path towards death and begins to trust only in himself, rather than the objects that surround him.

Scholarship surrounding *The Stranger* shows differing interpretations of Camus's symbolism. However, Carl Viggiani, a scholar published in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, argues that "the feelings inspired by these phenomena, and the psychological and dramatic functions of the symbols in Camus' works closely parallel those associated with them in religious



myths from their very beginnings” (Viggiani 878). Viggiani neglects to reveal Meursault’s ability to conquer the effect of the phenomena that surround him, but Meursault’s rejection of the Chaplain’s advice mirrors his rejection of hope and trust in the religious mythological symbols of nature. Another critic published an article in the book, *Camus*, edited by Germaine Brée, wrote that “There is nothing remarkable about the choice of ‘sun’ and ‘sea’ as the respective symbols of destruction and freedom...Yet, both symbols grow so naturally out of a personal and vividly felt experience of nature that they remain free of the deliberate and rather artificial air they sometimes wear in the work of other writers” (John 144). This personally felt experience that John references supports the notion that the sun acts as a symbol for Meursault. Where the external force of sunlight “vividly” affects Meursault’s character, the sun acts as a correlative for Meursault’s suffering. By the end of the novel, Meursault no longer suffers exemplifying the suspension of meaning Camus delivers through his absurd heroes.

Like Meursault with the sun, Camus initially allows the moon to govern the absurd hero’s emotions in his play, *Caligula*. In the beginning of the play, Caligula, the emperor of Rome, disappears in order to search for the moon and remains missing for several days. When he returns, Caligula’s friend Helicon is convinced that Caligula was searching for meaning. Caligula corrects him and tells him that he wanted the moon because “it’s one of the things I haven’t got” (Camus 7). For Caligula, the moon represents the impossible, the very essence of the absurd, and as a result, the symbol destroys his clothes, dismantles his empire, and tampers with his sanity. “I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn’t of this world” (Camus 8). If the moon acts an imaginary cause of his homicidal madness, what comment does Camus make on the role of symbols and the correlation between outside objects and an individual’s emotional stability? In Suetonius’s historical account of Caligula’s life, he states,

“On nights when the moon was full, [Caligula] was in constant habit of inviting her to his embraces and his bed” (Suetonius 266). Camus extracted direct facts from the Suetonius’s history of Caligula, and suggests that the desire for the impossible governs the ancient Caligula and the emotional effect of objects played a role in his dictatorship as well. Because, in Camus’s retelling, Caligula ceases to find the moon and returns home dirty and distraught, Camus presents the moon in a fictional context but emphasizes the object as having a significant effect on his actions, in a similar way that the sun does for Meursault. With his acceptance of nature’s triumph, Caligula resorts to senseless murder in an attempt to become as ruthless as the absurd world surrounding him and gains immeasurable power by attempting to become as pitiless as his environment. As it turns out, Caligula, Meursault, and Sisyphus all experience a form of redeemed power in their retreat from the external.

In searching for the moon, Caligula’s hope rests unfulfilled, and forces him to seek order in other ways outside his dependency on the external world. In Act II, Caligula converses with Scipio, the poet, and tells him, “My appetite for life’s too keen; Nature can never sate it. You belong to quite another world, and you can’t understand” (Camus 35). Here, Caligula attacks the difference between life and the world as unsatisfactory through a poetic vehicle, generally reliant on symbolism. He desires more out of life than the slavery to natural forces, to symbols outside of himself, and in turn, he attempts to obtain the ruthlessness of nature by acting out of indifference and shamelessly killing the people around him. This is the result of the symbol’s power and constraint within his life and his convergence with his objective correlative. Whereas for Sisyphus and Meursault, the retreat inward dissolved the symbol’s constraint on their lives, Caligula attempts to become the symbol, the impossible, and a result, becomes a force of mass destruction, proving the disruption of reality symbolism creates within literature.

Where psychoanalytic criticism surrounding Caligula's character views his extreme actions as a result of the sociological conditions of Camus's time, one could argue that Caligula's actions demonstrate the consequence of a symbol that suspends the character from consciousness.

According to a biographical reading of Camus, Patrick McCarthy in his book, *Camus*, explains Caligula's senseless murders as the fault of humanity. "The violence of *Caligula* was all around him and the despair of *Le Mythe* had taken over the streets. Camus could do nothing about this so he turned it into universal stupidity" (McCarthy 129). However, McCarthy overlooks the fact that the moon's power is a pertinent cause in Caligula's absurd outbreaks. Thus, Camus implicitly shifts the blame of Caligula's actions to the indecipherability of the symbols in our external world. Caligula attempts to teach his subjects how to find contentment by confronting the indifference of external life, yet is killed for his attempt to become the symbol of power over his subjects.

In the case of Caligula, Camus highlights a curious expression of mastery over oneself and one's actions. By using death as the driving force that makes Caligula happy, we see that the true power over the natural world, the attempt to *be* God, gives Caligula the drive to control life. Caligula tells Caesonia in Act IV, "I'm the only true artist Rome has known—the only one, believe me—to match his inspiration with his deeds" (Camus 65). Stirred by Drusilla's death, he finds benediction in allowing others to feel death around them. Camus makes it a point that Caligula is ethically mistaken, however, as Cherea replies, "That's only a matter of having the power" (Camus

complete without a total self-surrender to the dark impulse of one's destiny" (Camus 49-50).

Separate from the struggle to find the impossible within the world, lies Caligula's personal struggle to realize his personal fate. In "Tensions in the Works of Albert Camus," Lurline Simpson describes how "[Caligula] disposes of all fictitious substitutes for life—emotions, literature, art, normal human need for happiness or security—and permits himself one human reaction, scorn" (Simpson 189). Through his contempt, he embodies his facticity, or his mortal fate, and in turn, surrenders to his destiny. At the end of the play, he announces to Caesonia:

*This* is happiness...the glorious isolation of man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the ineffable joy of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives...so as to perfect at last the utter loneliness that is my heart's desire. (Camus 72)

Although Caligula arouses less sympathy than Meursault and Sisyphus in his readers, he nevertheless achieves happiness through this inner struggle and his mental triumph over the impossibility of understanding the world, which was initially signified by the moon.

Sisyphus, Meursault, and Caligula use an internal contempt against the external world in order to feel internally satisfied, which reflects Camus's contempt of the power symbols carry in literature to illicit a specific meaning. [camus on symbol] When Sisyphus was originally condemned to hell, it was a consequence of "His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life [that] won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing" (Camus 120). At the end of Act II in *Caligula*, Scipio asks if the emperor knows a "secret solace" that helps him endure life. Caligula responds, "Yes, I have something of the kind...[*very quietly*]: Scorn" (Camus 38). Meursault in *The Stranger* undergoes his famous awakening directly after his fit of rage with the Chaplain. This scorn reflects a narrative frustration

caused by his the attempt to find meaning. Many readers have a difficult time with Camus precisely because there is no definitive meaning to the symmetry and organization of his work. However, each work is similar in the evolution of the symbolic power, which negates our desire to find a definitive meaning for symbols within each text.

*Caligula* and *The Stranger* both begin with the death of the protagonist's family member and ends with the death of the protagonist himself. Camus likens each character to their earthly symbols just prior to their fatality, yet it is unclear what this implies about the role of the sun, moon, and rock within each narrative. In the stage directions before Caligula's assassination, Caligula looks in the mirror. "He contemplates himself, makes a slight leap forward, and, watching the symmetrical movement of his reflected self, hurls the stool at it" (Camus 73). Camus makes an association between Caligula and the moon by portraying Caligula as a reflection. Scientifically, the moon's glow is a reflection off light of the sun. He attacks his reflection, and attacks the moon that lives as an oppressive image inside of him. Perhaps this is an attack on the search for meaning that the moon inspires in Caligula. Meursault undergoes a similar embodiment of the sun. In the closing lines of the novel, Meursault concludes, "For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate" (Camus 123). Throughout the novel, Camus depicts the sun's disillusion of Meursault. The closing statements represent his embodiment of the role that the sun played in his life. In the first part of the novel, he hated the heat of the sun. Now, he wishes his audience to hate him for he represents a similar combination of meaning and meaninglessness.

With this in mind, Albert Camus accepts the presence of unexplainable symbols, those which Eliot deems necessary for effective literature, but instead gives three examples, where the protagonists' mind gains strength over the symbols and images, and connects them by including

them in the “cycle of the absurd.” Eubanks states, “In order for symbols to achieve social significance they must be in solidarity with the pathos of the common man” (Eubanks 304). The sun, water, and the moon hold influence in all of our lives. In prison, in hell, and within the insane vessels of the mind, these objects represent the baffled attempt to rationalize world, causing one to render the disparity as absurd. But Camus shows the absurd hero finding contentment, ultimately making a profound statement concerning the illusory meaning, yet appropriate indecipherability of symbolism within a text.

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