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Albert Camus: Philosopher -- Artist

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Much of modern fiction, whether it can be said to be existential in theme or not, is concerned with deep philosophical problems. The rapid technological development and increase in the very tempo of our lives so noticeable in the Twentieth Century has caused many thinkers to re-evaluate and rediscover fundamental truths and ideas. A sense of isolation or estrangement from other men and from God is a dominant theme in today's writing. Modern man feels lost or alone when he observes the world around him. Thrown back upon the limited resources of his own mind, each thinking man feels a need for making absolute truths applicable in his own life."

Cover Page Footnote

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ALBERT CAMUS: PHILOSOPHER—ARTIST

Much of modern fiction, whether it can be said to be existential in theme or not, is concerned with deep philosophical problems. The rapid technological development and increase in the very tempo of our lives so noticeable in the Twentieth Century has caused many thinkers to re-evaluate and rediscover fundamental truths and ideas. A sense of isolation or estrangement from other men and from God is a dominant theme in today's writing. Modern man feels lost or alone when he observes the world around him. Thrown back upon the limited resources of his own mind, each thinking man feels a need for making absolute truths applicable in his own life.

Perhaps no modern writer exhibits this phenomenon more vividly than Albert Camus. Motivated by a dissatisfaction with traditional philosophical systems he sought answers to disturbing metaphysical problems and tried to explore them in his art. At all times he was guided in this search by a desire to express these ideas in concrete language, not in abstract concepts which he felt soon became unintelligible. In the words of John Cruickshank, "he approached metaphysical problems in a particular way and with a particular emphasis. He arrived at general conclusions about human existence through an instinctive distrust of abstractions and a direct concern with human beings in their individuality." It is this refusal to deal extensively with strictly abstract ideas, as so often found in philosophical essays, that led him to choose the fictional and artistic tools at his disposal to convey his message.

Camus, himself, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, comments upon some of the great novelists whom he considered "philosophical novelists", such as Balzac, Sade, Melville, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Proust, Malraux, and Kafka. He says:

... the preference they have shown for writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments is revelatory of a cer-

tain thought that is common to them all, convinced of the uselessness of any perceptible appearance. They consider the work of art both as an end and as a beginning. It is the outcome of an often unexpressed philosophy, its illustration and its consumation. But it is complete only through the implications of that philosophy. It justifies at last that variant of an old theme that a little thought estranges from life whereas much thought reconciles to life. Incapable of refining the real, thought pauses to mimic it.

This then, is the essential inspiration for Camus' artistic endeavors. Aligning himself with these men that he admires for their unique expression of timeless truths, he attempted to express his own version of reality in novels, plays and short stories. For him it was not enough to see certain truths intuitively through experience and reflection; they demand expression and in the same form in which they were revealed—the stark realities of everyday life.

Another factor explaining his choice of fictional and creative expression was Camus' primary moral concern. When referring to himself, Camus stated often that he was essentially a moralist and not a philosopher. As such, he needed to concern himself not only with the clarity of his message, but also with the most effective method at hand. He decided that the easiest pathway to universal truths was through the particular. While most men may not be readily drawn to extensive philosophical treatises, they might very well read a novel. If the artist is skillful enough the reader will arrive at the same truth in a more appealing form.

The importance of Camus and other writers like him lies in the effectiveness of their attempt to communicate truth. When the reader is drawn into the mind and actions of a particular character in such a way that he too feels the importance of the problem, the frustration felt in the face of the questions, and the tendency to despair, the theme of the work becomes a reality for him. Because he can identify so readily with the hero he is led to ask himself the same questions and to seek

some solutions. The problem is felt by the whole man before any solution is given. In this way the search for the real meaning of life, that is perhaps dealt with best in philosophical investigation, becomes real for him. It is only in this manner that I feel the efforts of theologians, philosophers, and other thinkers can find the response they are seeking. Modern man wants, perhaps more than at any other time, the answers to his questions expressed in a meaningful way. This, I feel, is precisely what Camus and many other contemporary artists are doing.

—EUGENE P. WALZ

KNOW THYSELF

But there are millions of me
hungering in China,
and many of me
starving in the plenty of New York,
and the Hungary of yesterday
hid my multitude of anxieties.
The steps of the storm-troopers
stifled my strained cries,
the bigots of Birmingham
unbalance my burden,
heroin and hashish help
drown my expression
while a smashed atom pulsates at my feet,
eating away at the pillars of the floor . . .
. . . And then you ask
why my back is hunched.
I can only smile as I ring
the cathedral bells.

—DON DORSCHER