

Albert Camus' biography (briefly)

Born November 7th, 1913, in Mondovi, a small village in French Algeria where Camus' great grandfather, originally from Bordeaux in France, had settled in the early 19th century. Camus' father was a shipping wine clerk and military veteran who died in WW1 when Camus was less than a year old. All he knew of his father was that he had become violently ill after witnessing a public execution. Camus' mother was illiterate, partially deaf, and poor. After her husband's death, Camus, his mother and his older brother lived with his maternal uncle and grandmother in a cramped three-room apartment in a working-class area of Algiers where his mother worked in an ammunition factory and cleaned houses.

Camus was able to afford elementary school because of his dead father's veteran status and, although he had recurring health issues, including tuberculosis, he distinguished himself as a student and won a scholarship to the Grand Lycee. There he was an avid reader (Gide, Proust, Verlaine, etc.). In 1932, Camus received his Baccalauréat Degree; in 1933, he enrolled at the University of Algeria for an advanced degree.

1933-1937: Married Simone Hié, divorced her, briefly joined the Communist Party, became disillusioned with it, and was expelled. During this period, he began his theatrical and writing career.

1940s—Married Francine Faure, worked as a journalist in France for the French Resistance newspaper *Combat*, wrote *The Stranger* which brought him immediate literary renown, followed by the philosophic *The Myth of Sisyphus* and became an editor at Gallimard Publishing. During this period, he wrote the plays *Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding* and maintained a strong friendship with Simone de Beauvoir and John Paul Sartre.

1947—Camus wrote *The Plague*, which was regarded by critics, such as Tony Judt in 2001, as an allegorical novel and fictional parable of the Nazi Occupation and the duty to revolt. **(We will discuss how well this theory fits the novel during our colloquy.)**

1951—Camus published *The Rebel*, a celebration of individual freedom and a critique of revolutionary violence and a condemnation of Marxism-Leninism that led to his total estrangement from Sartre who saw him as a reactionary. In 1956, he wrote his last novel, *The Fall*, and a collection of short fiction *Exile and the Kingdom*. During this period, he suffered from tuberculosis and also from the deteriorating situation in Algeria between the native Muslim population and the French minority who lived there.

1957—Camus won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Here's a bit of his speech of acceptance that gives a good sense of the kind of person he was:

“Every person, and assuredly every artist, wants to be recognized. So do I. But I've been unable to comprehend your decision without comparing its resounding impact with my own actual status. A man almost young, rich only in his doubts, and with his work still in progress. . . how could such a man not feel a kind of panic. . . And with what feelings could he accept this honor

at a time when other writers in Europe, among them the very greatest, are condemned to silence, and even at a time when the country of his birth is going through unending misery.”

Subsequently, he adapted Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* for the stage and continued to work for peace and a political solution for Algeria.

January 4, 1960—Camus died in a car accident with his friend and publisher Michel Gallimard.

Absurdist Philosophy (briefly)*

In absurdist philosophy, the Absurd arises out of the fundamental disharmony between the Individual's search for order, meaning, hope, and purpose in life and the blank, indifferent silence of the universe (that is, the meaninglessness of the universe). Humans have three possible ways of resolving this dilemma according to Søren Kierkegaard (*The Sickness Unto Death*, 1849) and Albert Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942):

1. **Suicide.** Camus rejected this possibility as he saw it as only more absurd to end one's existence.
2. **Religious, spiritual, or abstract belief in a transcendent realm, being or idea.** Kierkegaard said that this way required a leap of faith that is non-rational but perhaps necessary. Camus regarded this route as “philosophical suicide”.
3. **Full, unflinching acceptance of the Absurd and continuing to live despite it.** Kierkegaard saw this possibility as “demonic madness” whereas Camus believed that one's freedom and the opportunity to give life meaning lies in the recognition of and embrace of absurdity. If the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes (religious or moral), then we as individuals are truly free, and we have an opportunity to create our own meaning and purpose, to decide and think for ourselves, and to live every moment fully. In the case of Sisyphus endlessly pushing that rock to the top where it would fall back down, Camus saw a hero, someone who would rise every day to fight a battle he knew he could not win and yet doing so with wit, grace, compassion for others and even a sense of mission.

*(info derived from Wikipedia)

Which characters in *The Plague* best fit the definition of absurdist heroes. Which do not?

Philosophy of Revolt

For Camus, revolt is the Sisyphean spirit of defiance in the face of the absurd. It is the spirit of opposition against any perceived unfairness, oppression, or indignity in the human condition. True revolt is not done simply for the self but out of solidarity with and compassion for others.

*(info derived from Wikipedia)

Which characters in *The Plague* fail to revolt? Why?