

## **Contemporary Literature**

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Good morning, we are going to begin with Albert Camus' *The Fall*. Albert Camus is a French writer of Algerian origin. He was born in Algiers and he later shifted to France. We will talk about that later and his short novella, *The Fall* which was written in 1956. The keywords from *The Fall* are, *The Fall* that is the title of our novella, philosophy of absurdism, philosophy of human existence, myth of Sisyphus and Camus' partnership and influence of Sartre on Camus and the technical aspect of *The Fall* which has been much appreciated, much emulated that is the confessional tone which Camus employs in the novella. I will begin with a quote by Albert Camus and you can also look at his dates 1913 to 1960 that is Camus' life.

So, In *Happy Death*, one of his writings Camus says, but in the end one needs more courage to live than to kill himself. In his famous *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he says, there is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide. In *The Rebel* which was written in 1951, he says, who despairs over an event is a coward, but he who holds hope for the human condition is a fool. So, those quotations, those words by Camus should be sufficient to tell you about Camus' philosophy of life.

The bottom line is that human condition is hopeless. Camus was born, as I was just telling you, in Algeria. He was a French origin. He shifted to France and came in contact with the prominent figures of the leftist group and that is how he came in contact with Jean Paul Sartre and his companion Simon Beauvoir. At the center of Camus' thought is the thesis that human existence is essentially absurd.

So, that is what we were talking about. Human existence or condition is essentially absurd. Human beings search for a meaning in their existence, but with the demise of traditional beliefs in a religion and ideology, this search remains meaningless. That means that human condition is hopeless, is meaningless, is absurd. The philosophical concerns of Camus remain isolation of individuals.

Human beings are isolated. The entire universe is alien, it is hostile and human beings

find themselves by some quirk of fate, by some accident. They are thrown in this alien and hostile universe. Along with these issues, Camus was also concerned with the issues of evil and the finality of death. So, all these things you will find, all these discussions you will find in his works, especially the fall.

Some of his major works are *The Stranger* or in French is called *L'Etranger*. The French term for the fall is *La Chute*, that is the French term for the fall. *The Plague*, where he discusses what happens when a society suffers a plague, a disease like plague, the rebel and the fall of course, which was written in 1956. Camus won the Nobel prize for literature in 1957. Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* was written in 1942 and it describes, it elaborates on Camus's notion of the absurd and of its acceptance with the total absence of hope which has nothing to do with despair, a continual refusal which must not be confused with renouncement and a conscious dissatisfaction.

Sisyphus is a mythical figure, a figure from Greek mythology and he is the person who challenges gods as a punishment. He is condemned to repeat the same meaningless task of pushing a rock up a mountain only to see it roll down again and then push it back up the mountain again. So, the essay concludes, the struggle itself is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy, although Sisyphus leads a life of monotony, there is no change in his life, almost like the human existence. You do the same things, you follow the same routine, but according to Camus, happiness can be found even in this routine, although existence remains meaningless and human beings' life, it is full of day to day struggle much like the life of Sisyphus.

In *L'etranger* or the stranger which was published in 1942, it begins very significantly, I will read it out to you. Mother died today or may be yesterday, I cannot be sure. The telegram from the home says, your mother passed away, funeral tomorrow, deep sympathy which leaves the matter doubtful, it could have been yesterday. This essay, this novel is noted for its laconic tone as the news of the death arrives on an ordinary day. So, the lead character, Marcell, lives for the sensual pleasures of the moment and yet ends up accepting responsibility for an accidental killing and he is tried and judged guilty of murder not because he actually murdered somebody, but he failed to cry at his mother's funeral and because he refuses to embrace Christianity.

So, those are the grounds on which he is condemned to be dead, but it is not for the actual murder that he commits, but because of, because his failure to conform to the accepted norms of society, his refusal to embrace Christianity and also his inability to cry at his mother's funeral. This is the reason why he is condemned to death. So, again this is a very typical example of Camus' notion of the apathy. Absurdity of the universe of society that we live in. Now, what is absurd? Absurdism is defined for example, human

existence as we were just talking about, its meaninglessness.

Its meaninglessness is dull monotony, the hopelessness, the constant despair human beings live in, the ability or rather the inability to connect, connect to other people, to other members of the society. So, one of the key novels by Camus which expounds his philosophy of absurdism is *Lothrange* which we were just talking about the outsider, Essay the myth of Sisyphus and then also his play *Caligula*. So, these are the key writings which encapsulate Camus' vision or Camus' notion of absurdism. For Camus, absurd is not a negative term, it is not a synonym for ridicule, but it symbolizes the true meaning of existence. So, the term for Camus is accepting the view that life is meaningless and this once you accept that you embrace the real view of life, the realistic view of life because the universal is illogical and it is also irrational.

Once you accept that life becomes much simple. So, in other words, it is a more radical view of Niche's declaration that God is dead. Now, we will talk about Camus and Sartre. Jean Paul Sartre as we know, he is one of the leading philosophers of the 20th century and Sartre and Camus came together during the after the or during the Second World War. They philosophically they shared a lot in common, but their political ideologies differ and which led to a rift and they parted ways because they could not see eye to eye on certain political grounds because Camus rejected the Soviet model of socialism and Sartre still believed in that.

So, that was the reason that was the main reason for their fall, the fallout between them. Now, coming to *The Fall*, *The Fall* which was written in 1956. So, *The Fall* was Camus' last completed novel. On the surface, it is a simple narrative as the hero or the protagonist Jean-Baptiste Clemens. He recounts the events from the last few years of his life.

So, it famously begins. I will read you a couple of lines at the beginning and then we will discuss. So, this is how *The Fall* begins. May I offer my services without running the risk of intruding? Question. I fear you may not be able to make yourself understood by the worthy gorilla who presides over the fate of this establishment.

In fact, he speaks nothing but Dutch. Unless you authorize me to plead your case, he will not guess that you want gin. There, I dare hope he understood me that *nord* must mean that he yields to my arguments. He is on the move indeed. He is making haste with a sort of careful deliberateness.

You are lucky he did not grunt. When he refuses to serve someone, he merely grunts. No one insists. Being master of one's moods is the privilege of the larger animals.

Now, I shall withdraw. Happy to have been of help to you. Thank you. I had accepted if you were sure of not being a nuisance. You are too kind. Then, I shall bring my glass over beside yours.

Now, who is the interlocutor? You know the person who is being spoken to, who is the listener. Here we find Jean-Baptiste Clemens sitting in a bar. We have to also understand the setting, the narrative technique, the themes. So, it is against the backdrop of these three elements that we are going to understand the fall. So, it begins with Jean-Baptiste Clemens who is sitting in a bar and addressing an unnamed listener, an unidentified interlocutor.

Who could it be? We are not very sure. So, let me read it again. May I offer my services without running the risk of intruding? I fear you may not be able to make yourself understood by the worthy gorilla who presides over the fate of this establishment. In fact, he speaks nothing but Dutch. So, who is this gorilla? The bartender.

Who are the people in this setting? You have the narrator Jean-Baptiste Clemens. You have the bartender. You have an unnamed unidentifiable listener. So, these are the three characters present in the bar. Why is it called gorilla? Because maybe he is not civilized enough.

He merely grunts. He is not articulate enough and perhaps this is Camus' commentary on a society when people are not articulate enough. They are nothing more than mere animals. And then, also pay attention to the subsequent sentence. Being master of one's moods is the privilege of the larger animals. This bartender does not really count in the larger scheme of life, but those people are more dangerous who are in greater control.

So, they become greater animals. You should remember that this novel is a response to the horrors of Nazism and holocaust in Europe. So, written in 1956, Albert Camus, who pondered over the meaning of life, the nature of evil, finality of death. All these elements are found in the first few lines itself that human beings, those who are in greater control, those who have the bigger right to be the master of their moods are bigger animals, are more dangerous people to the society and that is a clear reference to the Nazis. Next paragraph, you are right.

His dumbness is deafening. It is the silence of the primeval forest heavy with menaces. At times, I am amazed by his obstinacy in snubbing civilized languages. His business consists in entertaining sailors of all nationalities in this Amsterdam bar. This is

important to understand. The setting is Amsterdam, the country in which this conversation is taking place is a bar in Amsterdam and the name of the bar is Mexico City.

So, this becomes your setting now. Mexico City is the name of the bar situated in Amsterdam. With such duties, would not you think there might be some fear that his ignorance would be uncomfortable? Fancy the Cro-Magnon man lodged in the tower of Babel. Now, in this bar, you have people of all nationalities. It is like a melting pot. Perhaps, this is a larger reference to Amsterdam as a place where people from all over come and get together.

So, this is a bar which is presided over by a bartender who speaks nothing but Dutch and it is almost like a prehistoric man who is locked up in the tower of Babel. Babel is the place where there are so many languages being spoken at the same time that no one can follow anyone. So, that we were talking about human beings inability to connect. This disconnect could be because of several factors.

It could be the boundaries of religion. It could be the boundaries of nations. It could be all these man-made boundaries and the boundaries caused by languages. So, this disconnect which is a result of so many divisions among human beings that is what Camus is interested in. One of the rare sentences I have ever heard from his mouth proclaim that you could take it or leave it. What did one have to take or leave? The doubtless are friends himself.

I confess I am drawn by such creatures who are all of a piece. Anyone who has meditated a good deal on man by profession or vocation is led to feel nostalgia for the primates. They at least do not have any ulterior motives unlike the so called civilized human being. Pregnant animals do not have an ulterior motive, but the Nazis are worse than the original crow magmen or the primates.

That is what is being discussed. Our host to tell the truth has some although he harbors them deep within him. As a result of not understanding what is said in his presence, he has taken on a distrustful character. Hence that look of touchy dignity as if he suspected at least that all is not perfect among men. That disposition makes it less easy to discuss anything with him which does not concern his business. Notice for instance on the back wall above his head that empty rectangle marking the place where a picture has been taken down.

Indeed, there was a picture there, a particularly interesting one. A real masterpiece, well I was present when the master of the house received it and when he parted with it. In

both cases, he did after weeks of rumination with the same distrust. In that respect, society has somewhat spoiled, you must admit, the frank simplicity of his nature.

Mind you, I am not judging him. I consider his distrust justified and should be inclined to share it if as you see my communicative nature were not opposed to this. I am talkative alas and make friends easily. Although I know how to keep my distance, I seize any and every opportunity. When I used to live in France, were I to meet an intelligent man, I immediately sought his company. Now, one key feature of a confessional tone, confessional tone or even a dramatic monologue.

Some dramatic monologue is a kind of writing where there is a single speaker and he has an interlocutor, a listener. The listener has very little to contribute by way of speech. He just listens. The speaker does the major part of talking and he while talking, he reveals his own personal true character. Robert Browning, the British poet, he was the master of dramatic monologue and in Camus' *The Fall*, we find an improvement on that technique, not exactly an improvement, but then he has taken the entire idea of dramatic monologue a step further.

So, what happens when in a dramatic monologue, a person talks and he talks and he reveals himself, a self revelatory in nature. Interestingly, the speaker in a dramatic monologue tries to project his best foot forward or best part of his character or nature. What happens? What the reader infers is exactly the opposite. We say, we find the mendacity, the duplicity, the basic contradictions in the speaker's personality. So, it is not a very flattering portrait that emerges, although the speaker tries to do his best.

He tries to project a very positive, a very flattering image of himself, but what emerges at the end is not a very glowing picture, it is rather the opposite. So, this is what he is trying to portray himself as, as an intellectual, as a person who is filled with curiosity, a very normal healthy kind of curiosity and extremely communicative person. Are you staying long in Amsterdam, a beautiful city, is it not? Fascinating, there is an adjective I have not heard for some time, not since leaving Paris, in fact years ago, but the heart has its own memory and I have forgotten nothing of our beautiful capital north of its quays. Quays are the harbors. Paris is a real *trompe l'oeil*, a magnificent dummy setting inhabited by four million silhouettes, nearly five million at the last census.

Why? They must, they must have multiplied and that would not surprise me. So, that is what his opinion of Paris is, that it is a beautiful city. The listener finds it fascinating, but according to Clemens, it is an over populated congested city where human beings are nothing more than mere shadows, which is interesting. Camus himself came from France.

So, he does not have very positive image of Paris. The Dutch, they are much less modern. They have time, just look at them. What do they do? Well, these gentlemen over here live off the labors of those ladies over there. All of them, moreover, both male and female are very middle class creatures who have come here as usual out of mythomania or stupidity, though too much or too little imagination, in other words. From time to time, these gentlemen indulge in a little knife or revolver plate, but do not get the idea that they are keen on it.

Their role calls for it, that is all and they are dying of fright as they shoot it out. Nevertheless, I find them find them more moral than the others, those who kill in the bosom of the family by a process of attrition. Haven't you noticed that our society is organized for this kind of liquidation? You have heard of course, of those tiny fish in the rivers of Brazil that attack the un-wary swimmers by thousands and with swift little nibbles clean him up in a few minutes, leaving only an immaculate skeleton. Well, that is what their organization is. Do you want a good clean life like everybody else? You say of course, how can we say no? Okay, you will be cleaned up.

Here is a job, a family and organized leisure and the little teeth attack the flesh right down to the bone, but I am unjust. I should not say their organization. It is ours after all. It is a question of which will clean up the other. Now, this is a very direct reference to the cruelty, to the inhumanity, to the innate barbarism in human beings.

Human beings exist just to save themselves, not their own kind, but they are selfish, they are cruel and they can eat. It is almost like an animal, you know, survival of the fittest. So, the larger fish eats up the smaller fish. They clean it up so well that all you find is an immaculate skeleton and that is what human beings are and it is not their organization.

Notice the way the words have been italicized. It is not just their organization. It is not just the Nazism or the Nazis or the perpetrators of violence in any form or anywhere, in any part of the world. It is not there. It is ours. So, what we are talking about is the notion of collective guilt and collective responsibility.

All of us are responsible for what happens in the rest of the world. All of us should share the collective guilt. We should partake in the guilt when there are atrocities, whenever there is a violation of human rights. That is what Camus' philosophy is all about.

So, it is not just theirs. It is also ours. We cannot just say that it is not our problem. It

is not an evil propagated by us.

It is theirs. It is not. That is what Camus says. We have to own up. We have to accept the responsibility for every atrocity that happens in any part of the world. But allow me to introduce myself. Jean Baptiste Clemens at your service, pleased to know you. You are in business, no doubt, in a way excellent reply, judicious too. In all things, we are merely in a way, not exactly, but in a way, yes, you can get away with saying in a way.

It does not give you the specifics. Now, allow me to play the detective. You are my age in a way with the sophisticated eye of the man in his 40s who has seen everything in a way. You are well dressed in a way that is as people are in our country and your hands are smooth. So, he is a bourgeois in a way, but a cultured bourgeois. Most of Camus' writings are attack on the bourgeois society, the middle class society, the complacency, the self satisfaction class, self satisfaction of the middle class.

So, therefore, so he or a bourgeois in a way, but a cultured bourgeois. We think we are cultured, but are we? Smiling at the use of the subjunctive, in fact, proves your culture twice over because you recognize it to begin with and then because you feel superior to it. Lastly, I amuse you and it is said without vanity. This implies in you a certain open mindedness. Consequently, you are in a way, but no matter professional interests, professions interest me less than sex. Allow me to ask you two questions and do not answer if you consider them indiscreet.

Do you have any possessions? Some good. Have you shared them with the poor? No, then you are what I call a seduce. If you are not familiar with the scriptures, I admit that this would not help you, but it does help you. So, you know the scriptures decidedly. You interest me.

Seducees are Jewish groups which are supposedly quarrelsome and extremely wealthy. So, they denied the immortality of the soul. So, this is a comment on the Jews. So, but it is not exactly what Camus is doing here is being very satirical. Jews were persecuted because they were believed to be tainted.

They were supposedly greedy, amassing wealth, not sharing it with the poor, etcetera. So, therefore, in a way, it gave the Nazis the moral superiority, the moral right to persecute them. So, this is the satire on the generally accepted beliefs of those times. You are leaving already? Forgive me for having perhaps detained you.

No, I beg you. I would not let you pay. I am at home at Mexico City and have been particularly pleased to receive you here. I shall certainly be here tomorrow as I am every



evening and I shall be glad to accept your invitation. Your way back? Well, but if you do not have any objection, the easiest thing would be for me to accompany you as far as the harbor. Then, by going around the Jewish quarter, you will come to those handsome avenues with the trams loaded with flowers and noisy as thunder, tripping down them.

Your hotel is one of them, the dam, the dam, you first please. I live in the Jewish quarter or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren. Now, Hitlerian brethren, the Nazis. So, this is another satirical reference. Hitlerian brothers spaced it out a bit. So, the place where he is residing right now, it was a Jewish quarter, but then the Nazis, they spaced it out or just raised it to the ground.

What a clean up! 35000 Jews deported or assassinated, that is real vacuum cleaning. I admire the diligence that methodical patience. When one has no character, one has to apply a method. Here, it did wonders. No one can deny it and I am living on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history.

Perhaps, that is what helps me to understand the gorilla and his mistrustfulness. Thus, I can struggle against my natural inclination carrying me towards what I like. When I see a new face, something inside me sounds the alarm, slow, danger, even when the attraction is strongest, I am on my guard. Do you know that in my little village, during a reprisal operation, a German officer courteously asked an old woman to please choose which of her two sons would be shot as a hostage. Choose, can you imagine that, that one? No, this one and see him go.

Let us not dwell on it, but believe me, any sort of surprise is possible. Now, this incident based on a true story, it is a recorded event where a German soldier before killing one of the two children of a woman actually asked, insisted in knowing that which of the two children should be shot, which of the two children should be killed. So, now, asking a parent to choose between the lives of her children, that is the height of cruelty, that is the height of barbarism. If you remember Sophie's choice, the novel by William Styron, it deals with the same theme. Sophie's choice, she is forced to choose which child would she prefer to see, live. So, she has a boy and a girl and when she is in the concentration camp, when the children and the mother of the children, they are all together in the camps.

Then, one day she is forced to choose between the lives of the children, it has to be either the boy or the girl. This is the story, this is the choice that Sophie was forced to make, which one of the two children should live. What does it do? It leads the parent scarred for life that they willingly let go of one child and that was the extent to which the Nazis wanted to wound their prisoners. It was not just the physical attack, but it was also

the attack on their souls that is talked about here.

I knew one pure heart who rejected distrust. He was a pacifist and a libertarian and loved all humanity and the animals with an equal love, an exceptional soul that is certain. Well, during the last wars of religion in Europe, he had retired to the country, he had written on the threshold, wherever you come from, come in and be welcome. Who do you think answered that noble invitation? The militia who entered and made themselves at home and disemboweled him. This is what happens and this is a very cynical view of the society. A person who refused to be corrupted by the atrocities around him and in order to proclaim his faith for the humanity, he puts up a sign on his door, all are welcome, anyone can come and make themselves at home here and the army enters his house and brutally kills him.

So, that is what happens when one is too trusting, when one is too good, it does not work in today's world. Oh, pardon madam, but she did not understand a word of it anyway. All these people are out so late despite the rain which has not let up for days. Fortunately, there is gin, the soul glimmer in this darkness. Do you feel the golden copper colored light it kindles in you? I am walking through the city of an evening in the warmth of gin.

I walk for nights on end. I dream or talk to myself interminably. Yes, like this evening and I fear making your head swim somewhat. Thank you, you are most courteous, but it is my overflow. As soon as I open my mouth, sentences pour out. Besides, this country inspires me. I like this crowd of people swarming on the pavements, wedged into a little space of houses and canals, hemmed in by fogs, coal lands and the sea steaming like wet washing.

I like it for it is double. It is here and elsewhere. So, you see like its people, the country also has a double. You know the hypocrisy, the duplicity, it is everywhere.

It is there in the city itself. The city has two faces like people. So, it is a commentary. It is a brutal commentary on the then European society, its moral hypocrisy, its duplicity, its mendacity and the lies it told to itself and its people. Yes, indeed. From hearing their heavy tread on the damp pavement, from seeing them more ponderously in and out of their shops, full of gilded herrings and jewel the color of dead leaves, you probably think they are here this evening. You are like everybody else. You take these good people for a tribe of syndics and merchants counting up their gold crowns together with their chances of eternal life whose only lyricism consists in occasionally without doffing their broad brimmed hats, taking anatomies essence.

You are wrong. They walk along with us. Holland is a dream, a dream of gold and smoke. It is like a picture of hell being drawn. Gold smoke, smokier by day, more gilded by night. So, greed, flesh trade, smoke, the heat, it is almost like living in hell. We will continue with this. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.