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English 12F

10/16/13

The Hour of Consciousness: Understanding God’s Judicial System

Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* juxtaposes the importance of God’s morality and the impact it has in the judicial system of an absurd reality, in which social code is rigid and behavior that strays from protocol is subject to scrutiny. In presenting this environment, Camus emphasizes a universal morality, swayed by God and superimposed over an individual’s unique perception of the world, such as Meursault, the protagonist. Others condemn this tragic hero to an unfortunate fate, validated by the belief that because an atheist is subordinate in the eyes of God, he must gradually come to understand the ubiquity of this singular morality. Much like Meursault, in Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sisyphus is condemned to a fate he cannot control due to the social constructs of an absurd reality. Only when Sisyphus has reached the top of the hill with his boulder does he amount to what Camus calls, “the hour of consciousness”: essentially, the understanding of the absurdity of life. Camus’ placement of biased judicial figures gradually strengthens Meursault’s understanding of absurdity, illuminating the importance of the “hour of consciousness” in both articulating and refuting God’s ubiquitous morality.

Meursault’s first encounter of this intertwined morality, consisting of both religions and judicial principles, occurs first when the Policeman intervenes into Raymond’s abusive relationship. By the policeman interjecting his morality into the situation, he clearly affirms a certain dogma, providing an entry point in Camus discussion of absurdity that has engulfed an entire society. “The cop told him to knock it off and said that the girl was to go…He also said that Raymond ought to be ashamed to be so drunk…” (Camus 37). This sense of great absurdity in standardizing one’s lifestyle becomes even more apparent in Meursault’s characterization, when he responds to the situation. Often he repeats the phrase, “I said I was expecting anything, and besides I didn’t like cops,” (Camus 37) indicating that he dislikes the nature of authoritative forces but cannot articulate why. In comparison to the policeman his response to a rather ethical situation is simply to remain complacent, as he finds no inherent way to judge. Meursault is presented as the atheist to God’s jurisdiction. When Raymond asks him to write a letter to his abused beloved, he complies, which might seem odd for an individual entrenched in absurdity. “Since I didn’t say anything, he asked me to write it for him. Since I didn’t say anything, he asked if I’d mind doing it then and I said no” (Camus 32). Unlike the policeman, atheists like Camus and Meursault believe that there isn’t an “a priori” method of confronting any ethical situation. God, in essence, condemns Raymond as the policeman acts as a medium to assert God’s morality. Meursault witnesses the entirety of this event, analyzing the exchange between Raymond and the Policeman and concluding that both that there is not an inherent morality to judge Raymond’s beliefs and that he dislikes authoritative figures, however, he has yet to make the connection between the two.

The succeeding encounter with the judicial system, again, has individuals entrusting God’s word into Meursault, as he is put on trial for the murder of the Arab, but more generally, his morality. The magistrate and judge play the role of God and display religious biases in accordance with the same morality as the policeman. “After a short silence, he stood up and told me that he wanted to help me, that interested him, and that, with God’s help, he would do something for me” (Camus 67)*.* In essence, the confrontation occurs between Meursault’s morality, and the morality of God. However, in what should be an objective courtroom; religion is brought in as a second form of condemnation further emphasizing how God pervades all. Throughout the court case, the prosecution believes that unless Meursault places hope in God he is of a subordinate ranking, as he does not follow pre-existing fundamentals. “But from across the table he had already thrust the crucifix in my face and was screaming irrationally, ‘I am a Christian. I ask Him to forgive you your sins’” (Camus 96). Religious roots condemn Meursault as a “monster” rather than just a guilty for the murder he committed. However*,* Meursault has yet to make the connection between the morality of leading judicial figures, those who surround him, and God. Camus illuminates this notion by Meursault’s routine to nod when he became disinterested in the court case or a magistrate who continuously badgers him (Camus 69).These biases toward Meursault for not committing himself to God go noticed and as a result, diminish his value for those in absurdity.“…the judge would lead me to the door of his office, slap me on the shoulder, and say to me cordially, ‘That’s all for today, Monsieur Antichrist’” (Camus 71). This blatant form of subjectivity only further elucidates God’s stranglehold on the individual’s mind, collectively meshing the minds of many into a singular mentality.

Upon being condemned to a fate out of his hands, he comes to a full understanding of absurdity and reaches his personal “hour of consciousness”. This “hour of consciousness” begins in the courtroom, as he understands that the morality of God that he has been exposed to is in fact prevalent for everyone. “It was then I felt a stirring go through the room and for the first time I realized I was guilty” (Camus 90). Acknowledging guilt is a breakthrough for Meursault as he now begins his early stages in pinpointing absurdity as a perception of life. Perhaps this is why he considers the prosecuting Magistrate’s search for validation in the murder to be “plausible” (Camus 99). Shortly after, having experienced the treachery of prison and being condemned to a fate, he fully understands that it is impossible to break absurdity which is why he reminisces of a time when he was in liberation, and simply content. “…all the familiar sounds of a town I loved and of a certain time of day when I used to feel happy” (Camus 97). This longing for liberation alludes to the idea that he understands his others, citizens of the jury and judicial figures alike determined his unfortunate fate, which he greatly dislikes.

Meursault’s conscious awakening allows him to discover the logical irrationality of absurdity and his victimization after straying from God’s dogma. Camus’ characterization of Meursault awakens the reader to a perception of life removed from God’s jurisdiction. This reality places no inherent value in social behavior and does not condemn the individual for abiding by their personal reality, removed from an authoritative power. Sisyphus and Meursault push a boulder, weighed down by the scrutiny others have placed on them and rise to the top, acknowledge absurdity, and watch the boulder slowly tumble down to earth, to repeat the cycle over. Yet, it is at that very moment, upon the top, just before the boulder tumbles that both of Camus’ heroes reach their epiphany and acknowledge their struggle to exist in an absurd world. The absurd consciousness is the acknowledgement that both of their fates have been determined by another and regardless of their struggle, the triumph is acknowledgment of absurdity and the perpetuation of one’s own morality. In the words of Camus, “…if this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious” (Camus, 121).

Works Cited

Camus, Albert, and Matthew Ward. *The Stranger*. New York: Vintage International, 1989. Print.

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1975. Print.