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### **Camus' Attitude to Mythology and his Definition of Myths**

*En utilisant une sélection des œuvres de Camus, dans cet article, je vais examiner la conception de la mythologie de l'auteur et identifier les motivations pour son profond intérêt dans les mythes. Je vais citer notamment les mythes présents dans les textes de Camus afin de vérifier l'idée selon laquelle Camus peut être le créateur de la mythologie moderne. Enfin, je vais essayer de déterminer si l'utilisation des mythes par Camus les a rendus plus accessibles aux lecteurs du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

Using a selection of Camus' works, in this paper I will examine the writer's conception of mythology and identify the motives behind his deep interest in myths. I shall name particular myths present in Camus' texts in order to test the opinion that Camus may be the creator of modern mythology. Finally, I shall try to establish whether Camus' use of myths has made them more accessible to twenty-first century readers.

We all know that myths are ancient stories invented in order to explain natural and historical events. Myths are accounts relating the age of heroes, the beginnings of the world and the adventures of ancient gods<sup>1</sup>. First and foremost, they are the objects of people's beliefs that influence the customs and lifestyle of a particular culture. This way of understanding myths suggests that they lose their strictly religious overtones. I am not mentioning that without reason, because Camus' existentialism is an atheistic form of this philosophy<sup>2</sup>. He focuses his interests on humanism, infinity, tragedy, pessimism and, of course, on the absurdity of human life. These modern myths are similar to ancient ones - they consist of fabulous elements embedded in contemporary realities. The difference is the origin of the story.

In Camus' works it is impossible to find a clearly formulated definition of myths, but we are able to create a definition through an interpretation of his texts. In Camus' texts myth is not presented as false information spread among people just to make their lives easier, more interesting and easier to understand. Camus' interpretation of myths shows us that they can be used as an equivalent of a fabulous and symbolic account. The writer is allowed to apply this form, instead of a symbol or allegory, as a picturesque mean of literary expression, as far as it is concerned with the level of his work. Camus used myths to explain metaphysical events in human's lives, which seemed progressive at the

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<sup>1</sup> Della Summers (ed.), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2006, p. 1088.

<sup>2</sup> Waleria Szydłowska, *Camus*, Warszawa, Wiedza Powszechna, 2002, p. 21.

time of his literary activity, since he is among existentialist writers whose works contain determinism. We have to mention that myths in Camus' interpretation are not only selected from Hellenic or Roman legends, but they are also based on modern Catholic and Jewish culture<sup>3</sup>.

In his first works Camus fully rejected the use of mythological content as a mean of literary expression. The year 1937 was a kind of breakthrough because it was at this time that his deep fascination not only in ancient tales, but also in Greek culture and literature began. Myths started appearing in his literary production because of this interest. It is also relevant that the ancient world of the Mediterranean was the cradle of humanism, which was one of the main interests of existentialism<sup>4</sup>. In the life of the young Albert Camus there was one person who helped him discover his vocation as a writer. It was Jean Grenier, a French philosopher and writer who taught for a while in Algiers and significantly influenced the young Camus. The fact that Grenier was an admirer of Greek philosophy was likely to have sensibilized Camus to mythology. Apart from that, the philosophy of Nietzsche and the works of André Gide influenced Camus' mythological interests<sup>5</sup>.

The next part of my analysis involves the aspect of recreation of existing myths within Camus' pieces. The first myth that I will present is the history of Sisyphus. It is easy to identify this myth, due to the fact that the figure of Sisyphus is introduced unveiled in the philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus is one of the numerous absurd figures presented in Camus' works, who could be characterized by his liking of terrestrial life and his rebellion against fate and the gods' contempt of mankind. We can see the absurdity of his useless work, which is repetitive and would not have led to any achievement. His activity is mechanical and controlled by a higher power. It is also clear that this hero possesses a great passion for life and fights against death. His situation corresponds to the realities of human life. Everyone must fulfill their daily tasks, thus making their life repetitive and consequently absurd. Sisyphus, unlike humanity, sees the nonsense of this painful existence and his attitude leads him to attempt to override the current rules. It should be noted that the mechanical activity of Sisyphus is a punishment meted out by the gods for his passion and his rebellion against the abyss between the call of human beings and the irrational silence of the world<sup>6</sup>. Camus is an absurd human, just like Sisyphus, and he will be sentenced for his rebellion and passion. It is also clear that the myth of Sisyphus is a perfect illustration of Camus'

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<sup>3</sup> Monique Crochet, *Les mythes dans l'œuvre de Camus*, Paris, Éditions universitaires, 1973, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> « Greece », in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Social Sciences*, Byron Kaldis (ed.), Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2013, p. 387.

<sup>5</sup> See : André Gide, *Theseus* (1946).

<sup>6</sup> Crochet, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

theory of humanity<sup>7</sup>. We can also find a reference between Sisyphus and Jesus Christ when it comes to their love of mankind and their acceptance of fate and pain.

Thanks to Camus' literary activity, Sisyphus is not a distant, outdated hero in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He embodies modern man who suffers from constant routine and an inevitable fate. His rebellion only concerns himself because he lacks solidarity, unlike Prometheus<sup>8</sup>.

The figure of Prometheus appears in several of Camus' texts, for example in *The Rebel*, *Prométhée aux enfers* (Prometheus in hell) and the *Notebooks*. The first example of Camus' interest in Prometheus was the fact that Camus and his Workers' Theatre<sup>9</sup> performed his interpretation of the play *Prometheus Bound*<sup>10</sup> by Aeschylus. He quoted Aeschylus presenting the figure of Prometheus in *The Rebel*. Camus highlighted two aspects of Prometheus' attitude: rebelliousness and moderation<sup>11</sup>. Prometheus embodies the metaphysical rebellion of man against the unjust fate imposed by a higher power. Camus describes Prometheus in his *Notebooks* as a revolutionary ideal whose rebellion is second to none and remains relevant today. We have to mention that in the original text of Aeschylus, Prometheus is at the mercy of the gods (particularly of Zeus), while Camus described his situation in a different way. He becomes a victim of people who do not want to change anything and continue to live according to existing rules. It is also important that Camus shows the figure of Prometheus from different points of view, and he makes references to Adam or Cain from the Bible<sup>12</sup>. Both mythological figures, that we have just analyzed, embody absurd, rebellious man in Camus' texts. Sisyphus and Prometheus are an illustration of his modern theory.

Camus could also be considered as a creator of modern mythology. We identify myths as ancient stories, but how should we recognize and define mythology in Camus' writings? Monique Crochet<sup>13</sup> proposed clear criteria for qualifying Camus' stories as myths. According to Crochet, a text should not only consist of archetypical behaviors and values, but should also be widely read and quoted, because of its great importance,

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<sup>7</sup> <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1964.tb00163.x/abstract;jsessionid=E47F839F074A4B95FABB9AD9F01F7E54.f01t03?deniedAccessCustomisedMessage=&userIsAuthenticated=false> (connexion on 14/05/2013, 14.57).

<sup>8</sup> Crochet, *op. cit.*, Paris, 1973, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> While a student at the University, Camus joined and left the Communist Party. His stormy relationship with the party continued throughout his life. Still, he remained a socialist, and founded The Workers' Theater in 1935. The Workers' Theater was intended to present socialist plays to Algiers' working population. Camus hoped to educate the workers, in accordance with his own beliefs. The theater company survived until 1939. See: <http://mural.uv.es/yororo/camus.html> (connection on 17/04/2013).

<sup>10</sup> Ancient greek tragedy, written BC probably by Aeschylus.

<sup>11</sup> Crochet, *op. cit.*, Paris, 1973, p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

and should have elements of fantasy. These components make up the idea of universal literary communication as described by Gilbert Durand<sup>14</sup>.

The first myth that I would like to analyze is *The Misunderstanding*. Camus shows in *The Misunderstanding* collective pain that is inflicted on the family system. In this story Camus refers to myths that relate to the theme of family, and namely the myth of Oedipus and the Prodigal Son. The main character of the book is Jan, who wants to bring happiness to his mother and sister, Martha, and save them from suffering. For his good act he receives death, just like Jesus Christ. His death can be interpreted as a sacrificial deicide and martyrdom. Jan returns home not only to make his family happy, but also because he feels poorly in exile, this motive is parallel to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Camus also highlighted the differences and similarities between Jan and Oedipus. Jan's story was symmetrically opposed to that of Oedipus. His mother only joined him after her death and the concealment of his identity did not add any legitimacy to the situation<sup>15</sup>. Jan is used as an instrument of the absurd and his figure is a symbol of the fight against this absurdity. These facts add great importance to the whole story. We can see that man is condemned to infinite exile and shall never find his home. We can interpret Martha's idyllic visions of warm and sunny countries as elements of fantasy in this story.

One of a considerable number of myths created by Camus is the story of the exile of the Plague. The writing does not contain plague nor heroes nor the story itself, but only havoc and fights and the spread of evil, which implies plague. This book refers not only to the numerous historical events connected with plague, but also to biblical and mythological stories<sup>16</sup>. In contrast to the Bible or ancient mythology, there are no references to supernatural determinants of this phenomenon. Also despite the availability of modern medicine plague is still a huge terror, as it was 5 million years ago. The prominence of destruction is a reference to the World Wars or, more generally, to every war in human history. The pain showed in this story is collective like the pain caused by a war. An important theme of this piece is the archetype of separation<sup>17</sup>. We can see the analogy between the journalist, Raymond Rambert, and Orpheus. They both suffer, longing to be together with their lovers. The heroes in Camus' story are also separated from nature, Ornan is isolated and locked up, and he is forced to stay in a town devoid of greenery. The great victory was the reunion of the journalist and his mistress. The people in *The Plague* fight against death which is a sign of injustice and

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<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Durand, *L'imagination symbolique*, Paris, PUF, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Hopkins, « Camus's Failed Savior: *Le Malentendu* », *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol 39, No 4, 1985, p. 251-256.

<sup>16</sup> Crochet, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret E. Gray « Layers of Meaning in *La Peste* ». In *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. Edward J. Hughes (ed.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 165-177.

great pain. In Camus' book, we can also identify nostalgia for a world where man can live in peace with himself and in harmony with others and the natural habitat<sup>18</sup>.

Considering the aforementioned examples, we can see that ancient heroes quoted by Camus in his texts are not outdated figures, but they are presented as modern men. They are men who fight against the absurd of everyday life and for full consciousness of life. Camus is a creator of modern mythology. Like ancient mythology, his pieces contain archetypical figures, events or pictures and are widely read and quoted around the world. His works remain relevant and deal with important issues.

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<sup>18</sup> Crochet, *op. cit.*, p. 243.