

"the fall" by albert camus essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Camus' *The Fall* is an interesting view on the monologue going on in the mind of the main character Judge Clamence who tells the story of his life and his quest for meaning. The story also revolved around the judge-penitent's quest to understand the processes of his life as well as his ascent or descent (as the case may be) from everyday life to the role of judge-penitent.

In the story, Clamence tells us that he used to lead an essentially perfect life in Paris as a highly successful and well-respected defense lawyer. The vast majority of his work centered around "widow and orphan" cases, that is, the poor and disenfranchised who otherwise would be unable to provide themselves with a proper defense before the law. He also relates anecdotes about how he always enjoyed giving friendly directions to strangers on the streets, yielding to others his seat on the bus, giving alms to the poor, and, above all, helping the blind to cross the street. In short, Clamence conceived of himself as living purely for the sake of others and "achieving more than the vulgar ambitious man and rising to that *supreme summit* where virtue is its own reward"

Formerly, he had been an eminent Parisian lawyer, supremely satisfied with his own virtuous nature and hedonistic mode of life. His many-faceted relations with people were all on a superficial level and he considered himself vastly superior to all. "I felt like a king's son, or a burning bush . . . personally marked out, among all, for that long and uninterrupted success."

However, late one night when crossing the Pont Royal on his way home from his "mistress," Clamence comes across a woman dressed in black leaning over the edge of the bridge. He hesitates for a moment, thinking the sight

strange at such an hour and given the barrenness of the streets, but continues on his way nevertheless. He had only walked a short distance when he heard the distinct sound of a body hitting the water. Clamence stops walking, knowing exactly what has happened, but does nothing — in fact, he doesn't even turn around. He even avoided reading the newspapers for several days after to keep from knowing the outcome.

Despite Clamence's view of himself as a selfless advocate for the weak and unfortunate, he simply ignores the incident and continues on his way. He later elaborates that his failure to do anything was most probably because doing so would have required him to put his own personal safety in jeopardy.

Several years after the apparent suicide of the woman off the Pont Royal — and an evidently successful effort to purge the entire event from his memory — Clamence is on his way home one autumn evening after a particularly pleasing day of work. He reflected on his life and decided that he was happy as an individual can possibly be — saying that his day had been particularly good “ a blind man, the reduced sentence I had hoped for, a cordial handclasp from my client, a few generous actions and, in the afternoon, a brilliant improvisation in the company of several friends on the hard-handedness of our governing class and the hypocrisy of our leaders.... I felt rising within me a vast feeling of power and — I don't know how to express it — of completion, which cheered my heart. I straightened up and was about to light a cigarette, the cigarette of satisfaction, when, at that very moment, a laugh burst out behind me.”

Clamence turns around to discover that the laughter, of course, was not directed at him, but probably originated from a far-off conversation between friends. For him, the laughter is thus alarming because it immediately reminds him of his obvious failure to do anything whatsoever about the woman who had presumably drowned years before. The unlucky coincidence for Clamence here is that he is reminded of this precisely at the moment when he is congratulating himself for being such a selfless individual. That evening on the Pont des Arts represents, for Clamence, the collision of his true self with his inflated self-image, and the final realization of his own hypocrisy become painfully obvious.

However, Clamence initially attempts to resist the sense that he has lived hypocritically and selfishly. He argues with himself over his prior acts of kindness, but quickly discovers that this is an argument he cannot win.

The realization that his whole life has been lived in hypocrisy and denial precipitates an emotional and intellectual crisis for Clamence which, moreover, he is unable to avoid having now discovered it; the sound of laughter that first struck him on the Pont des Arts slowly begins to permeate his entire existence. In fact, Clamence even begins laughing at himself as he defends matters of justice and fairness in court. Unable to ignore it, Clamence attempts to silence the laughter by throwing off his hypocrisy and ruining the reputation he acquired therefrom.

Throughout this experience, he learned one important thing about life: that, unlike basketball or tennis, life had no rules and thus, pure innocence made no sense at all. Naturally, Clamence wanted to put an end to the laughter he

was hearing and realized that in order to escape the guilt he felt over his apathy on the woman's plight on the bridge, he had to find a way to embrace the world of freedom. This made him a judge of and for himself, but this was not enough.

The book, for me, is very relevant and the role of Clamence even more so. I am sure that there are many Clamences out there who are considered successful by earthly standards and yet, they still find themselves grappling and struggling with the realities of life. Without a doubt, a significant part of the philosophical message of the novel is that human knowledge of both the meaning of life and the nature of "the good" are beyond any exact human knowledge. Rather, the intellect is likely, on Clamence/Camus's view, to be contradictory, uncertain, and fraught with risk of error. It is seen as difficulty and likely to produce the mechanics of escape into certainty on the part of us mere humans.

I am of the belief that Clamence is a living model of this. In the story, Camus described Clamence's early years as a serious attempt to live a life of clear meaning and absolute rules. This is very similar to any Tom, Dick and Harry, if I may opine. And just like anyone of us, Clamence starts to entertain many doubts about his life when he reaches middle age. His choices mirror the anxiety predicted in the theory he later propounded, and his acts are often contradictory and puzzling - actually suggesting coherence toward his skepticism.

The fact that the author has chosen Amsterdam is also significant in the story. It seemed to depict the fall which Clamence will have to experience in

his journey to self-discovery. Clamence often speaks of his love for high, open places — everything from mountain peaks to the top decks of boats. “ I have never felt comfortable,” he explains, “ except in lofty surroundings. Even in the details of daily life, I need to feel *above* ” (Camus 288). The location of Amsterdam, as a city below sea-level, therefore assumes particular significance in relation to the narrator.

It can be said that the judge-penitent’s fall from his pedestal is a gradual one, the beginnings of self-doubt taking the form of a distant laughter and an awareness of an inner anger in the episode with the cyclist. His failure to react to the cries of the drowning woman marks the final stage in this philosophic metamorphosis from certainty to doubt. His discovery is a dual one: all men bear a universal guilt, and all men seek to avoid judgment and proclaim their innocence to the world.

Clamence’s argument posits, somewhat paradoxically, that freedom from suffering is attained only through submission to something greater than oneself. Clamence, through his confession, sits in permanent judgment of himself and others, spending his time persuading those around him of their own unconditional guilt.

In fine, I found *The Fall*, very interesting and poignantly relevant because any one of us has a Clamence inside. All of us seek to achieve success based on the standards set by the society we live in. We try our best to fit into a world where others can call us successful and good –only to realize in the end that we do not fit into this world. The reason for this is because most of us, just like Clamence, do things because we feel that doing so will make us

better individuals in the eyes of our fellow men. And yet, despite living within the standards set by society, we still feel a certain emptiness because we have done the right thing for the wrong reasons -self-flattery, and for our personal selfish reasons.

Just like Clamence, many of us realize that his attempts at self-derision can only fail, and the laughter continues to gnaw at him. This is because his actions are just as dishonest: " In order to forestall the laughter, I dreamed of hurling myself into the general derision. In fact, it was still a question of dodging judgment. I wanted to put the laughers on my side, or at least to put myself on their side."

Reference:

Camus, Albert. The Fall *[online]*

Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Camus

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