

Study Guide: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS

How to Use this Study Guide:

The questions are not designed to test you but help you to locate and understand information in the text. They do not normally have simple answers, nor is there always one answer. Consider a range of interpretations - preferably by discussing the questions with others. Disagreement is encouraged.

After the assigned reading, you will work with a partner to answer the following two questions. You will select who answers which question. Each individual is responsible for drafting out a written answer to one question, and each answer should be a substantial paragraph (6-10 sentences). Each pair is responsible for discussing, editing, and suggesting improvement to each answer.

Points for this activity will be based on the quality of *both* of the answers. If you are absent the day groups work on the study guide, you are responsible for answering all of the questions, turned in the following class period.

Camus presents Sisyphus as the quintessential absurd hero. Although there are several versions of Sisyphus' life on earth and of his offence against the gods, Camus argues that they all show him scorning the gods, hating the death that he knows is his fate, and living life passionately. Thus, he concludes, "Sisyphus is the absurd hero ... as much through his passions as through his torture" (120). Having asserted this, Camus is much more interested in Sisyphus' reaction to an eternity of hopeless struggle which is the worst punishment the gods could think to inflict.

1. "If this myth is tragic [and Camus, of course, regards it as such], that is because its hero is conscious" (121). When does that "hour of consciousness" hit Sisyphus? What exactly does he become conscious of? How does that consciousness make him a tragic hero?

Camus also suggests that Sisyphus is a symbol for modern man working every day on the same tasks (one can detect the influence of Karl Marx's theory of alienation here). Such a fate is "no less absurd" than that of Sisyphus, but the difference is that modern man remains unconscious of the absurdity for most of the time (121).

Finally, Camus makes the surprising assertion that, "Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable" (122). There is little attempt to argue this association: it is simply asserted. Once we give up hope and accept our life for what it is, then dissatisfaction and discontent disappear and the doors to happiness are opened because from that point on our fate belongs to us. [This is not so much a conclusion to which Camus comes as a basic assumption on which everything else rests.]

2. "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart" (123). Explain what Camus means. "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). Why does Camus regard this as a necessary conclusion? Do you?