

# **Solitude, Suffering, and Creativity in Three Existentialist Novels**

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this research assignment/thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:.....

Date:.....

## **Abstract**

As existent beings, we identify with the world through our thoughts and perceptions. Man is driven to seek meaning by the very complexities and contradictions of existence. As self-conscious beings, we cannot live without a sense of awareness and understanding. Creativity allows an individual to develop a unique understanding of the nature and destiny of man. This study draws attention to writers who were able to transcend their external environment and immerse themselves in a setting where man's individuality is fundamental to living an authentic life.

Camus, Dostoevsky and Kafka made every effort to live consciously and authentically. They believed that inwardness was not to be defined by an external, social setting, but rather through an intimacy of consciousness. This awareness and unveiling of being enables us to create meaning. These authors removed their social mantles and were willing to sacrifice acceptance in the pursuit of this cause. They believed that every man has a responsibility to live an individual and authentic life. This psychological and even physical isolation is not easy, however, and often causes much suffering. Using existentialism as a framework, this thesis will focus on solitariness, suffering and creativity, all of which point to the importance of individual consciousness rather than living a life of societal pressures and conformity.

## Opsomming

As lewende wesens identifiseer ons onself met die wêreld deur middel van gedagtes en waarnemings. Die mens word gedryf deur die soeke na betekenis in die kompleksiteit en teenstellings van sy bestaan. As wesens met selfkennis kan ons nie leef met 'n gebrek aan bewustheid en begrip nie. Kreatiwiteit laat die individu toe om 'n unieke begrip van die aard en lot van die mens te ontwikkel. Hierdi verhandeling vestig die aandag op skrywers wat verby hul uiterlike omgewings kon uitreik en hulself kon indompel in 'n milieu waar die mens se individualiteit grondliggend is om 'n onvervalste lewe te lei.

Camus, Dostoevsky en Kafka het alles in hul vermoë gedoen om bewustelik en suiwer te lewe. Hulle het geglo dat die innerlike nie gedefinieer kan word deur die uiterlike, sosiale omgewing nie, maar eerder deur 'n intimiteit van bewustheid. Hierdie bewustheid en openbaring van bestaan laat ons toe om betekenis te skep. Hierdie skrywers het hul sosiale mantels afgewerp en was bereid om sosiale aanvaarbaarheid op te offer in hul strewe na hierdie doelwit. Hulle het geglo dat elke mens oor 'n individuele en onvervalste lewe beskik. Die sielkundige en selfs fisieke afsondering is egter nooit maklik nie en het dikwels groot lyding tot gevolg. Met eksistensialisme as raamwerk sal hierdie tesis fokus op afsondering, lyding en kreatiwiteit.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know. The thing is to understand myself, to find a truth which is true to me.

(Kierkegaard, *Papers & Journals* 1845)

Whether from choice or from circumstance, there have always been solitary men and women. But there is a special kind of solitary person who stands apart by having an exemplary relationship with dislocation and loneliness, whom Colin Wilson famously called the 'outsider'. My concern in this study is not, however, with the general category of outsider but with the existentialist conception of the nature of solitariness. To Søren Kierkegaard the outsider was 'the individual'; to Dostoevsky he was a 'double' or 'Titan'; to Kafka the 'responsible man'; and to Camus he was the 'authentic individual'. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Kafka and Camus each presents himself as an enigma concerned with man the enigma, the individual in his capacity for originality and creativity.

While it has become the practice in literary criticism to divorce the author from the work, this study precludes such distinction. It is the contention of this study that the work is an expression of the consciousness of the author, his values and beliefs. The work embodies the philosophy of the author, even if only in a negative way, through the creation of an anti-hero, an extreme instance of troubling psychic tendencies. The novels chosen for this study are Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Kafka's *The Trial* and Camus's *The Stranger*. These texts make for uneasy reading as they deal with uncomfortable subject matter - suffering, solitariness and truth (authenticity). Both the authors and their protagonists are intensely self-conscious and value conscious. They are strangers to accepted attitudes and outsiders in their own lands. Sometimes they exasperate us and amuse us. They make us feel judged and force us to reconsider our preconceptions. Camus, Dostoevsky, Kafka and the protagonists they create are located on the edge of society - they are rigorous, tormented, humorous and serious. Take Dostoevsky who suffered from epilepsy, and Kierkegaard who was a hunchback. Physically and temperamentally these writers are different, and they project their difference as the source of their creative power.

The first generation of existentialists were Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche – the nineteenth century founders. The major figures of the next generation, from the 1930s onwards, were individuals such as Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, Jean- Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Some were philosophers and some were theologians; some were theists and some were atheists; some called themselves existentialists and some rejected the name: Nevertheless they were all dedicated to the reawakening of the individual consciousness and the innate freedom of man. They believed that the greatest good was to rouse the individual to an awareness of himself and his freedom. “My whole life,” Kierkegaard wrote in his *Papers and Journals*, “is an epigram calculated to make people aware” (23).

Given his unrelenting focus on the existential subject, consciousness and freedom, Kierkegaard has emerged as the original figure or the founder of the existentialist attitude, for this reason, his work and thought is used as a frame of this study. Kierkegaard celebrates the ‘single one’ (the true individual) as opposed to ‘the crowd’ (which he equates with untruth), but he sees this Single One as set in a direct relation with a transcendent God. Before this relationship can come into being, a man must have struggled to discover his true inwardness, and it is with all the passion and non-rationality of this inwardness that Kierkegaard clings to the ‘absurd’ and attacks the ‘system’ (Muller 109). The central concerns in this study will thus be solitariness, suffering and creativity, which when brought into relation with one another, point to the authenticity of the human being.

What makes Kafka, Dostoevsky and Camus writers of particular interest for this study is that they shared an inability or unwillingness to identify with and become part of the anonymous generality of the social group. They had not been rejected, and they did not want to belong. They did the rejecting themselves, scorning ‘the crowd’. These writers and the characters they created chose (or were chosen) to live authentically (creatively) and endeavoured to preserve their singularity in an environment that compromises individuality. They recognised that man is invariably an actor in society, and if he acts his part too well, he has difficulty in discovering his true self. This psychological and perhaps even physical isolation is not easy however – the existentialist individual inevitably suffers for his cause. This ‘condition’ of suffering often associated with isolation is acutely portrayed in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, which deals with the pain of being strange and

alienated. Meursault, the protagonist in the story, seems to have no place in the world. The knowledge that he is different makes Meursault a detached individual, unable to forge real human relationships. This painful rejection of the social world and consequent movement into the self is also evident in *The Trial*. Franz Kafka relayed his thoughts through Joseph K., a man who has been put on trial without being given any information about what he was arrested for. The dreadful outcome of Kafka's *The Trial* is an example of the effects on a man who questions himself and his existence. Dostoevsky's narrator in *Notes from Underground Man*, on the other hand, revels in his suffering, proudly announcing how different he is, and the key metaphor declaring his difference is his pronouncement that he is an 'underground person'. He does not live in the world where actions matter, and he lives by choice, a willed refusal to engage with other people in any significant way.

### **Romanticism and Existentialism**

Although Romanticism is not strictly speaking a precursor of existentialism, it similarly deals with issues of subjective individuality and creativity, and throws a great deal of light on the idea of solitude. Romanticism is, indeed, the expression of the alienation and solitude. It dates from the time when the self became abstracted from the world under the impact of a scientific epistemology.

The romantic self postulates a divide which requires healing. This split had been brought about by the astronomical system of Copernicus and the philosophy of Descartes, as well as by the Lutheran Reformation. Sandall argues, Romanticism "supposes development of new ideas in the scientific, philosophical, and religious spheres" with a new philosophical interpretation of the self and with the discovery of the idea of the freedom of conscience (237). The consequences of this revolution in human consciousness did not manifest themselves until later. When the objective world became divorced from the subjective, man began to seek a way out of his solitude and isolation and to long for familiarity and intimacy in the subjective world. Romanticism was a movement directed towards what Chai calls a "heightened awareness of self" (284). The romantic self sought ways to develop and enrich the affective life, relying on the subjective world for its cosmic feelings. The inherent subjectivism of the romantics made them identify man with nature, where scholastic philosophy had always taken care to distinguish between the two. The romantic

self, when confronted with a growing sense of isolation, had sought to identify itself with the cosmos.

The Romantic movement was an event of great importance in the emancipation of the self from the domination of the social world. It liberated the self from a finite world, from its appointed place in the hierarchical order, and disclosed an infinite perspective. But although it did a great deal to free the self, and to stimulate its creative powers, it failed, says Collins, “to make it conscious of the need to forge a personality for itself” (32). Thus it fails to be personalist and the romantic individuality fails to be a personality. The romantic philosophy tends to lose its consistency and to disintegrate into infinity. Thus the affective life, in the enjoyment of an unhampered freedom of development, overwhelms the whole content of the self.

Existential philosophy starts by doubting the reality of the perceptible world, the world of objects and things. But the critique of objective knowledge cannot always remain at the idealist stage. It must push its investigations further, beyond the opposition of subject and object, beyond the perceptible world. This sphere of primary life is that of existing and of existence. To exist is for man to dwell within himself, in his own authentic world, rather than to be at the mercy of the social and biological world. Existential philosophy is the philosophy of destiny, of its intimacy and its relationship with concrete universality. It is never satisfied merely to consider the general and the objective processes of the external world. To be existential is to be what Kierkegaard calls a “knight of faith” - the individual who is able to discover “the sublime in the pedestrian” (*Fear and Trembling* 88).

Reality is originally part of the inner existence, of the inner spiritual communion and community, but it becomes degraded in the process of objectification and of having to submit to social necessities. The existential subject is part of Being, and is situated firmly in the world. Collins describes the existential sphere as the ‘personal sphere’, and explains “there is nothing general, nothing abstract in it” (200). Objective knowledge is invariably *social*, because it fails to apprehend the subject. The essential nature of objective knowledge, which is to be “universally valid, is social and depends on its degree of community” (Collins 201). Existentialist philosophy is a personalist philosophy; the human person is the real subject of knowledge.

## **The significance of Søren Kierkegaard**

This thesis employs Kierkegaard as the interpretive frame. Not only is Kierkegaard widely accepted as the real founder of the philosophy of existence due to his emphasis on the existential subject, but also due to his emphasis on individual accountability – the person who makes a choice of living each day authentically and creatively. He believes that man is an active subject who, as he puts it, “ethically and religiously everything” (quoted in Macquarrie 10). In the works that have been chosen for study, the protagonists embrace suffering and isolation over living inauthentically which generates a creative transformation. As I shall endeavour to explain, the protagonist’s descent into the ‘underground’ becomes the reader’s salvation.

Although Kierkegaard is not usually recognised as a social critic, he has offered some astute observations with regard to the social ills of the nineteenth century. His *Works of Love* was composed at the same time as the *Communist Manifesto*. Both Marx and Kierkegaard agree that industrial society has endangered the dignity of the human person. They point out that man counts for nothing in a society that is governed primarily by impersonal ‘laws’ of production and consumption and by the ends of selfish gain. The sharp divergence between them comes when more concrete proposals are made for reconstructing society along humanistic lines. Marx identifies the “truly human man” with the social group – the socialised man (Collins 12). Kierkegaard moves in the opposite direction. He does not believe that the remedy is to be found in an exclusively social direction, for he believed humane society cannot be produced without direct reformation of individual life. The ultimate success of both social and political revolution depends upon the basic transformation of individual existence. Kierkegaard’s observation of his environment reveals that men are guilty of forgetfulness of what it means to be an individual.

## **Existentialism in our time**

At the present time my existence is like that of a piece of the chessboard, of which the opponent says: that piece cannot move – like a deserted spectator, for my time is not yet come.  
(Kierkegaard, *Papers & Journals* 1839)

“One of the hallmarks of existentialism”, says Feltham, “is its strict contemporaneity” (315). Its view of life emerges from and accuses the mood of the times. It is this contemporaneity that makes the message of existentialism so urgent. It speaks so thoroughly to the contemporary submergence of subjectivity in regimes of technocratic control that we cannot fail to be impressed by its relevance. The ethical questions it raises about self and responsibility, about meaning and absurdity, and the way in which it poses these questions, are taken up, for example, by J.M. Coetzee, who has involved both Dostoevsky and Kafka in his own fiction, namely *Master of Petersburg* and *Elizabeth Costello*. It is therefore surprising to discover that not much has been written in recent times concerning existentialism’s inherent value for contemporary concerns (other than in the psycho-analytic sphere). This thesis is therefore in many ways an attempt to re-engage and emphasise the relevance of existentialism.

In the strictest sense, “existentialism is not a philosophy, but a corrective; it speaks to all philosophies” (Berguno 248). It sits in judgment upon any system that displaces the human being and loses sight of the freedom of the human being as its goal. It cannot be presented like other philosophies have been, because one of its major contributions is the insistence that the *how* of truth is as important as the *what*. In his book *Existentialism from Within*, Edgar Allen defines existentialism succinctly as follows: “Existentialism is an attempt at philosophising from the standpoint of the actor instead of, as has been customary, from that of the spectator” (3).

Perhaps one should not treat existentialism as a philosophy. Kierkegaard, for instance, never aspired to be numbered among the philosophers. He dreaded the day when he would be incorporated into text books which would be used for examination purposes. He rejected disciples and refused to be considered as the founder of a school of philosophy. What if a group of followers were to conform themselves to his principles? That would be to perpetuate in another form the very illness he was trying to cure - the lack of individualism in the world. Kierkegaard said in his *Journals* that he wished when he died to have carved upon his gravestone, “The Individual” (20). And this is exactly what all of the existentialists in our own century have tried to do - to make man aware of himself, where, faced with his finitude and his own non- existence, he must choose his self or his annihilation.

When John Wild of Harvard wrote in his essay “Existentialism as a Philosophy”, that this is the real philosophy of today, the concerns he was raising almost fifty years ago still apply. While academic philosophy, absorbed with “categories, essences, and abstract systems”, is practically ineffective he says (142), existentialism harks back to the best in classical philosophy, which “conceived of value and disvalue not as properties or essences, but rather as modes of existence” (142). He continues: “Evil is to act and to exist in a warped and privative way; good is to act in accordance with nature - to exist authentically in the highest degree” (143). While the opposition here between acts that are ‘private’ and acts that are ‘in accordance with nature’ might be problematic today, and the whole question of what constitutes ‘nature’ requires more careful elaboration, there is a sense in which the implied opposition between the insular and relational modes of living, between alienation and embeddedness, still holds true. Perhaps existentialism is still the philosophy for our time, when whole areas of the world are increasingly subjected to what Theodore Rozak had called ‘technocratic totalitarianism’, enslavement, and when human freedom and dignity in all areas are being seriously threatened by the systems of depersonalization. Perhaps we need urgently to be reminded that there is a kind of freedom, albeit a freedom with suffering, and that the bourgeois pursuit of happiness at the expense of authenticity is fraudulent.

Kierkegaard probably did not dream of the advances that science and technology would make in the century and a half following his death in 1855. Yet he is remarkably contemporary. His writings are full of what current psychological schools advocate – that quests for the authentic life rely not so much on an explicit doctrine of the transcendental self, but rather on a self whose full expression has been drastically diminished by modern social pressures of conformity. To think existentially is therefore to come to grips with the human situation as one in which we are actually involved. Truth is only grasped when it is seen from within, by those who are living through it. By going inward, through self-scrutiny, we will discover ourselves beyond the artifices of adult public life, and recover the meaning of authenticity that consists of being true to oneself, to the fractured, conflictual, unassimilable aspects of psychic life.

In his essay, “The Way of Authenticity and the Quest for Personal Integrity”, Michael Thompson reviews the conceptions of authenticity proposed by existentialist philosophers, who situate it in the inherent difficulty of resisting the herd instinct in one’s interpersonal relationships. He then sets out

to show how, despite the absence of authenticity as a technical term in psychoanalysis, the principles of psychoanalysis postulated by Freud are compatible with the views that existentialist thinkers espouse (144). Thompson concludes that in the psychoanalytic context the imposition and experience of suffering and isolation are invaluable components of authenticity and therapeutic change.

Thompson also provides examples of other psychoanalytic authors who similarly embrace the spirit of the authentic individual, relating it in their conception of the clinical situation, including the work of Donald Winnicott. Winnicott published a book entitled *The Capacity to be Alone*, which has become a psycho-analytic classic. Winnicott suggests that the capacity to be alone in adult life originates with the infant's experience of being *alone in the presence of the mother*. Winnicott goes on to make the extremely interesting suggestion that "it is only when alone that the infant can discover his personal life" (34). Winnicott conceives that this begins to happen when the infant is able to be in a relaxed state which is constituted by the experience of being alone in the presence of the mother. After being in that state for a while, the infant will begin to experience a sensation or impulse. Winnicott suggests that "in this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience" (34). He contrasts this feeling of personal experience with what he calls "a false life built on reactions to external stimuli" (34). Throughout most of his professional life, Winnicott was particularly preoccupied with whether an individual's experience was authentic or inauthentic. The capacity to be alone thus becomes linked with self-discovery and self-realisation. Contemporary opinions thus recognise that being aware of ourselves as individuals and the ability to embrace one's solitary tendencies (even if it causes some anguish), enhances our authentic and creative development as human beings.

### **Solitariness, suffering and creativity**

Death, suffering, struggle and guilt, these existential situations represent a limit to our power and knowledge. Yet paradoxically, they also represent opportunities for existential self becoming; they are the foundations of our freedom.

(Berguno, *Towards a New Conception of the Human Condition* 2008)

Kierkegaard admits in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that he had “an unhappy individuality which from its earliest years has been nailed fast to some suffering or other bordering on madness” (54). In *Sickness unto Death*, he is never more eloquent or more exact than when he writes of despair, which he knows from the heart. He writes of his own self-isolation as a form of the demoniacal. In 1848, one year after he had written the meditation, *Works of Love*, he experienced a religious crisis, which prompted him to write in his journal:

My whole being is changed. My reserve and self-isolation is broken – I must speak. Lord, give thy grace...Alas, she could not break the silence of my melancholy...Now with God’s help I shall be myself, I believe that Christ will help me to be victorious over my melancholy, and so I shall become a priest.  
(*Papers and Journals* 10)

Five Days later he had to take it all back:

No, no, my self-isolation cannot be broken, at least not now. The thought of breaking it occupies me so much, and at all times, that it only becomes more and more firmly embedded. (10)

What did he want to be eternally punished for? In the end Kierkegaard comes to accept his position: “I understand it as hitherto, that I must bear my punishment all of my life, of remaining in the painful prison of my isolation, in a profound sense cut off from communication with other men” (11).

Similarly, Camus, Dostoevsky and Kafka were unhappy men at war with society and with themselves. They were strangers to all accepted attitudes, and aliens in their own lands. Their only comfort was their ability to create, which allowed them to deepen their understanding of the nature and destiny of man. Nietzsche’s definition of greatness is applicable to these authors and their creations:

The man is great who knows how to be most solitary, the man who is surrounded by loneliness, not because he wishes to be alone, but because he is what he is, and cannot find his equal. (Quoted in Macquarrie 50)

Is the reason for this strangeness, this solitariness, to be an observer of humanity? However it is seen by these writers, it is considered an instinct that rejects all obligations to others and postulates a duty to oneself. Dostoevsky poses the recurrent questions: "Do you know what it means to be alone?...Do you understand, sir, what it means to have absolutely nowhere to turn?" (*Crime & Punishment* 56).

Existentialism takes up the question of solitariness extensively and effectively. It proposes that inwardness is not to be defined by circumstances, such as solitude or failure, but by the innate capacity of an individual to see the difference between his fate as an individual and his fate as a human. Nevertheless, this thesis is not about existentialism as such, but rather the way in which existentialism sheds light on the theme of solitariness and creativity evident in the texts under consideration. These texts are approached as explorations of the existential problematic: the question of being.

### **Man in the world – concrete existence**

I stand like a lonely pine-tree egoistically shut off, pointing to the skies and casting no shadow, and only the turtle-dove builds its nest in my branches.

(Kierkegaard, *Journals* 1837)

Because consciousness intends a world in general, our mode of being is necessarily implicated in the world. Man's consciousness is the projective source from which meanings proceed. Camus sees in this bond between the world and man an "absurd juxtaposition of a blind, relentless environment and being incorrigibly given to planning, hoping and seeking response from nature" (Collins 203). The world is senseless because it pays no heed to human coaxing. According to Collins, Camus translates Franz Kafka's tales about the individual's bewilderment before natural events and social conventions into a theory of universal nonsense and frustrations. Men are

individual entities and hence “individual centers of consciousness” (204). Consequently, each individual makes his own project of endowing a world with meaning and organisation.

The sense of solitude stems from man’s endeavour to develop his personality regardless of the life of the species. Only when man is alone, when he is overwhelmed by a distressing sense of his isolation, does he become aware of his personality, of his originality, of his singularity and uniqueness, of his distinctness from everyone and everything else. Kierkegaard writes that this isolation “would bring most men to despair, for it means the effort to dispel every illusion” (*My Work as an Author* 311). But the existentialist philosopher has no need to identify himself with the collective consciousness in order to overcome his solitude; he is able to achieve this through creative transcendence.

An extreme sense of solitude tends to make everything else appear alien and heterogeneous. Man feels himself to be a stranger, an alien without a spiritual home. As long as man does not feel himself at home in the world of his authentic existence, as long as he sees other people in the light of this alien world, he can only conceive the world, and the people in it, as objects reflecting an objectified world. Man has a sacred right to his solitude as well as to his intimate life. Solitude of self is experienced not so much within its own existence as in the midst of others, in the midst of an abstract world. But absolute solitude is inconceivable as it must of necessity be relative to the existence of others. Relative solitude, on the other hand, implies disability and exclusion. It also has a positive aspect when, transcending the objective world, it represents a higher state of consciousness. When that occurs, the implied degree of separation is from the everyday social routine, and this separation is a stage in man’s spiritual growth, facilitating alternations between solitude and the everyday life of society.

In *The Concept of Dread* Kierkegaard had said that “if inwardness is lacking, the spirit is finitized...Inwardness is therefore eternity, or the determinant of the eternal man” (191). To him inwardness was a consciousness of a tension within the soul requiring some decision involving a change of life. Kierkegaard lays particular emphasis on the subjective and personal character of every thinker, on the living presence of the philosopher in the act of speculation. The imprint of a philosopher’s personality is already manifest in the choice of problems. The faculty of

apprehension is essentially that of the self, of man as a concrete being, as a personality, and not that of the universal spirit or of the universal reason.

Thus solitude is rooted in the most fundamental problem of philosophy – that of the self, with its contingent problems of the personality, of society, of communion, and of knowledge. Man is constantly endeavouring to forget himself – to get in the social, busy world. It is the confrontation/ facing of the self that inspires fear. This sense of melancholy and fear can only be overcome by the exercise of creative activity. The creative act itself transcends time and place. Man, then is the dominating idea of life - his creative freedom and his creative predestination.

### **Alienation and authenticity - absurd**

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard presents two images of man. One is Agamemnon, the tragic hero or “knight of infinite resignation”, who sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia for the sake of the safety of the Greek ships, thus subordinating his individuality to the universal order. The other is Abraham, the ‘knight of faith’, who is commanded by “an absolute relationship to the Absolute” (85) to ‘suspend’ the ethical principles enjoined by the universal order and sacrifice his son Isaac. Kierkegaard’s ‘knight of faith’ stands in a unique relationship to God, not mediated by any order or universal law. He reaches the finite through a dialectic in which he first renounces the finite for the infinite, and then regains the finite through “faith by virtue of the absurd” (86). What is more, Kierkegaard’s ‘knight of faith’ must choose between God and creation. There is no longer a possibility of finding God in creation. He rejects society and culture for the lonely relation of the ‘Single One’ to God, thereby losing any check on the reality of the voice that addresses him. In its very affirmation of faith, as a result, Kierkegaard’s concept of the ‘knight of faith’ is a consequence and an expression of the ‘death of God’, as it entails the loss of faith in the universal order and in the society that purports to be founded on it. Kierkegaard emphasises that there is no conviction more unassailable than when the self knows itself as contingent or sinful, when it encounters something as absolutely different as God, or when it is so sunk in its guilt that it yearns for deliverance. Kierkegaardian inwardness is thus an awareness of insignificance and human frailty. Kierkegaard was trying to define what he called ‘the God-relationship’ in man: “My principal thought was that in our age, because of the great increase of knowledge, we had forgotten what it means

to exist, what inwardness signifies, and that the misunderstanding between speculative philosophy and Christianity was explicable on that ground” (*My Work as an Author* 322). The ‘death of God’ means the alienation of modern man as Albert Camus has tirelessly pointed out in his discussion of the absurd:

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 6)

The absurd, to Camus, is born of the confrontation of the human longing for happiness and for reason with the irrational silence of the world. The absurd means life without hope and without illusion. In conscious contrast to Kierkegaard, Camus asserts that “the absurd...does not lead to God ...the absurd is sin without God” (14).

### **The problematic of guilt - authenticity**

What confronts us again and again in others and in ourselves, in the characters of our literature and in the authors who create them, is the bewildering intermixture of personal freedom and psychological compulsion, and the specific form which this intermixture takes differs with each person and with each unique situation. The world as confronting the self and placing a demand on it; the absurd as the paradoxical way through which the self finds such meaning in existence as is open to it; the conflicts between oneself and the world; the suffering that must be borne as a part of one’s meeting with the world; our accountability for our total personal existence; and our failure in answering or answering in the wrong way – all these enter into an understanding of the problematic of guilt.

Not everyone is an artist, yet each one has need of personal confirmation that can come only when he knows his calling – his existence in the fullest sense of the term - as an answer to a call. No – one is able simply to confirm himself. He may be able to do without the admiration of the crowds,

but he cannot do without that silent dialogue, often internalised within himself, through which he places his efforts within the context of a mutual contact with what is not himself, with what is other. He needs to feel that his work is 'true' – both as a genuine expression of the reality that he encounters in his life and as a genuine response to some situation or need that calls him. The artist, of course, exists in a specially sharpened paradox of confirmation. He has sacrificed the possibility of a more direct confirmation through his relations with others or a more certain confirmation through his social role for the loneliness and uncertainty of trying to create something unique that only he can create. His designation as an 'artist' offers no confirmation, for unless he succeeds in this unique creation, his art is meaningless and his attempt to except himself from the ordinary calling of mankind a presumption. No-one can know himself to be a great artist, but only that he is called or even compelled to create. Consequently, no-one can become an artist without the risk of ending his life ignored or even scorned by the world while unconfirmed by himself. As the artist must risk himself to establish that he is an artist and perhaps fail in that risk, so everyone must risk himself to establish himself as the person that he is and risk failure in doing so.

## **Conclusion**

Man's personal experience of life will forever escape cognitive reflection, but it is nonetheless meaning-laden and meaning-giving. The concept of alienation derives from the tension between individual free will and various relationships. Metaphysical alienation is represented by the existential understanding of faith; humans are separated from any rational, cognitive understanding of their creator. Social alienation is caused by the inability of one person to understand and relate to another with any certainty.

Man is driven to seek meaning by the very absurdities and contradictions of existence and by the fact that as a self-conscious being he is not simply carried along by the stream of life but stands on the bank and watches it flow. Yet the meaning he seeks is that of the stream. The authors dealt with here recognize that an individual person does not exist as a self-evident, self-sufficient reality any more than he can be subsumed under his social role or group category. The need of the self for confirmation, the tension between personal and social confirmation, the impossibility of either separating or identifying social reality and the reality that speaks through the medium of the social -

all these make impossible those simple contrasts between the self and the other, the 'autonomous individual' and the 'mass society', the 'single one' and the 'crowd', the 'insider' and the 'outsider'. Creative personalities such as these authors experience great difficulties in their relations with the commonplace everyday world; they may be antagonistic to this world while, at the same time, through their creative transcendence, they apprehend the universe through it.

## Chapter 2

### **Notes from the Underground – The divided man**

#### **Introduction**

I imagined happenings, I invented a life, so that I should at any rate live.

*(Notes from the Underground 1864)*

The confusion between beauty and viciousness in man's interior world is the recurring theme of this Russian novelist, whose concern lies with the swell of passion and harmony that marks the movement of human soul. Dostoevsky provokes his readers by deploying a technique that confronts them first with man's innermost thoughts without presenting reasons and explanations. His characters are 'naked' people and many belong to the humiliated and offended, a title given to one of his books. *Notes from the Underground*, which is also translated in English as *Letters from the Underworld*, was first published in 1864 and is an outstanding example of Dostoevsky's skills of psychological analysis, depicting a character motivated by many contradictory impulses. Such contradictions were not clearly understood in the nineteenth century, but Freud and modern psychology generally were to explore in depth the irrational basis of much human thought and behaviour. It is an interesting fact that Freud, the founder of modern psychoanalysis, could not bear to read Dostoevsky's novels in his later years, because the divided minds of their characters were so much like those of his own patients with whom he had been working during the day. For Dostoevsky's characters, the "subconscious mind had become the center for all impulses and decisions" (Mochulsky 249).

Freedom was rated by Dostoevsky as more important than even happiness. Utilitarians and communists sought to remove suffering from the world and make everyone happy, while Dostoevsky and the Underground Man rail against this imposition. It was Dostoevsky's opinion that suffering was necessary to man. It was a means of expiating sin and therefore the road to salvation. To give up suffering would be to give up full consciousness of self. Ivan Karamazov puts forward the arguments of the utilitarians and communists in his Legend of the Grand Inquisitor. The

people readily give up their freedom to the church in exchange for security and happiness, but these people are persuaded that they will never be able to be free, because they are feeble and depraved. Dostoevsky feels that people are not like this, they are individuals, and it is this "individual human element that is lacking from Communism" (Berdyayev 78). He believed as all existentialists do that man cannot be authentic if he is not free. Kierkegaard had come to a similar conclusion. He felt that existentialist philosophy provided a corrective support to socialist philosophy, placing the individual more centrally and therefore in control. According to Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, "the crowd is the lie" (Hawton 190), and in order to be authentic, man must stand alone. Being solitary is a creative act, a choice of free will. The parallels between Dostoevsky's journeys from suffering to redemption and Kierkegaard's anguished, pre-reflective choice of what he will be, are worth noting. They both insist that we are defined by our suffering.

The enormous contrasts of beauty and barrenness in Russia, together with the dramatically violent history of the country, including the termination of serfdom less than sixty years before the 1917 revolution, had their share in shaping the Russian mind. Humour and sadness live close together, and these contradictions are fused inseparably by Dostoevsky. His characters have a desire for self-analysis, they love to discuss their own psychology directly and publicly. The real focus in Dostoevsky's tales, however, is the soul of man. It is the centre for everything that happens, and all that seems to matter in life is the consideration of what life has done or will do to man's soul.

In this novel, the Underground Man's confessions have an exterior and interior form. The hero asserts that he is writing exclusively for himself, that he does not need any readers, yet his every word is directed towards another. He despises this other, ridicules him, abuses him, but at the same time craves his favour, argues and persuades. The first words in the novel begin with: "I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man" (15). One of the most salient characteristics of the Underground Man is his profound self-contempt combined with a hugely sensitive ego. He "denies all dignity to his own suffering, but also to provoke a malaise, and to teach that to know oneself means to lose all self-respect" (Brombert 2). The story portrays, says Hubben, one of the "first anti-heroes in fiction, a protagonist utterly lacking every trait of the Romantic hero" (80). Dostoevsky's character cannot enter into a warm, living communion, and other people therefore share no solidarity with him. The very presence of others is a threat to his

liberty. In his lonely pride he will despise ordinary people with whom he rubs shoulders in the street. This person is living out a futile life on the margins of society, and such figures were to dominate much serious fiction in the twentieth century, notably Albert Camus's Meursault in *The Stranger*.

This disparaging self-portrait is a physical portrait up to a point. The Underground Man sees himself as weak and puny; he compares himself to the sinewy officer, and finds his own awkward silhouette utterly ridiculous. He sees himself as a spiteful, petty official, gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth. He quite literally sees himself, for the Underground Man likes to watch himself in a mirror. In the room of Liza the prostitute, he suddenly sees his own pale, loathsome, nasty face, with dishevelled hair, reflected in a mirror, and he derives a keen satisfaction from appearing revolting to the woman he will seek to humiliate in every possible way. Needless to say, the physical portrait tends to become a moral and psychological portrait as well; the bodily images are in reality metaphors. Dostoevsky's character compares himself to a hunchback, a dwarf, a cripple - this is to suggest his moral defects, his vanity, his psychological deformity and his bad faith.

Because the narrator (he has no name) is a thoroughly disagreeable person who seems to go out of the way to offend his readers, some care is needed to read the story well. It is important to note that the Underground Man is not Fyodor Dostoevsky, as the notes at the beginning and end of the story make clear. He shares some of Dostoevsky's ideas, but he is also the target of Dostoevsky's satire. Dostoevsky enjoyed handicapping himself by placing some of his favourite arguments in the mouth of a character he despised. In this and in other works, he strongly resists the impulse to sweep the reader away by making his views irresistible. He wants you to "be aware of both their strengths and weaknesses, and make your mind up independently" (Mochulsky 277). Another important aspect is that although some readers find that they identify with the Underground Man to some extent, unlike most popular fiction, this is not a story in which you are expected to identify with the narrator. The danger is, in fact, that the reader will become so exasperated with his tone and manner as to simply refuse to pay attention to what he is saying. It is therefore crucial not simply to let the Underground Man's self-contradictions cancel each other out and dismiss him as a madman whose ravings are not worth deciphering. It is precisely in the tension between various

emotions and ideas that the significance of the Underground Man's narrative lies. Close reading will reveal a careful and consistent psychological portrait.

*Notes from the Underground* is a complicated piece of writing that requires a bit of untangling. It is perhaps necessary to first consider the broad meanings Dostoevsky conveys through his Underground Man. During Dostoevsky's lifetime, the rational philosophies of naturalism and scientism swept through Europe and Russia. These ideas appeared most specifically in Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (Mochulsky 87), which advances a kind of socialist utopianism that Dostoevsky early on in his life embraced but came to despise. Chernyshevsky advances the notion that man is good, and when governed by reason and science, he can form an ideal society (88). The Underground Man, however, disagrees with the idea that man is simply a piece of material confined to act only according to the laws of reason. Dostoevsky held that man is irrational and even evil by nature, and that he isn't predetermined to act in any particular way.

Dostoevsky advances a thread of existentialism throughout *Notes from the Underground*. The Underground Man strongly opposes any notions of central planning and attacks the "Crystal Palace" (33) of Chernyshevsky and others. Because our choices mean something, we have meaning too, Dostoevsky argues. Though the decisions we make may be irrational, and even wrong, they are still decisions of our conscious free will. This free will, Dostoevsky maintains, is what separates man from the beasts, making him truly human. The necessary drawback to this free will, however, is the suffering that must accompany it. Yet to Dostoevsky, certain things are gained through suffering that cannot be gained without it. Truth, Dostoevsky suggests, can only be a result of a kind of extensive physical and mental torture. The ultimate example of such beneficial suffering, such selfless love, however, is the crucifixion of Christ, who heaped a limitless benefit on mankind by sacrificing himself. Christianity, to Dostoevsky, defied reason: it wasn't reasonable for Christ to die on the cross, yet His death was the most "beautiful and sublime" (17) thing imaginable.

In negative terms, the image of the underground, announced both by the title of the book and by the title of part one, may suggest an instinct or desire to hide, a sordid shelter, asocial behaviour, the repression of the unconscious and the need to elude normal human intercourse. At the extreme

limit, the image connotes death and burial. But the underground can also refer to courageous resistance, whether political or spiritual. And the voice that is heard coming from below could communicate a message in revolt against an established authority or ideology.

But the image of death also functions as an image of life. And this not only because what lies below the ground could bring to mind the image of the nourishing root, but because the underground, the place of burial, is also conceived as the privileged locus of prayer, of a spiritual message, and of resurrection. An ambivalent symbol of repression and revelation, the underground is thus at the same time a metaphor of sterile isolation and of a rebirth toward light, suggesting the proclamation of a radical truth from the depths of the unconscious.

### **Brief overview**

We meet the Underground Man when he is forty years old, having retired from his civil service job and secluded himself in a shabby apartment. At this point, he is a complete nihilist: he has no desire to interact with others, and he has total contempt for society and everyone who is part of it. In the second part of the novel, however, the Underground Man describes himself as he was sixteen years earlier, at the age of twenty-four. As a young man, the Underground Man is already misanthropic, proud, self-effacing and bitter, but he also still clings to certain values. He is enthusiastic about literature, craves human attention, and wants others to respect and admire him for his intelligence and passion. He is also occasionally subject to fits of idealism. In the course of the second part of the novel, however, we see how the Underground Man's inability to interact with other people hampers his attempts to form relationships and participate in life, driving him deeper underground.

The main issue for the Underground Man is that he has reached a point of stagnancy and inactivity. He states that "consciousness is inertia, that is, the deliberate refusal to do anything" (26), and believes that all spontaneous people, men of action, are active because they are stupid and limited. The first part offers a harsh criticism of determinism and intellectual attempts at dictating human action: "You, gentlemen deduce the whole range of human satisfactions as averages from statistical figures and scientifico-economic formulas" (30). The Underground Man

mentions this determinism in terms of a simple math problem, two times two makes four. He states that despite humanity's attempt to create the 'Crystal Palace', one cannot avoid the simple fact that anyone at any time can decide to act against what is considered good, and some will do so simply to validate their existence and to protest that they exist as individuals. The second part is the actual story proper and consists of two main segments that lead to a furthering of the Underground Man's super-consciousness.

The first segment concerns his obsession with a policeman who moves him out of the way like a piece of furniture while breaking up a brawl at a bar. He sees the officer on the street and thinks of ways to take revenge, eventually deciding to bump into him, which he does: "I unexpectedly made up my mind, scowled fiercely, and...our shoulders came squarely into collision! I did not yield an inch, but walked past on an exactly equal footing" (58), finding to his surprise that the officer does not seem to even notice it happened.

The second segment relates a dinner party with some old school friends to which the Underground Man decides to go. One is introduced to Zverkov, who is a prime example of the kind of man the Underground Man hates most. Zverkov is an active and decisive man, preferring to pursue concrete goals rather than contemplate the value of those goals in modern society. He has been very successful, having advanced far in his career and gained the admiration of his friends and acquaintances. The men fail to tell the Underground Man that the time has been changed to six instead of five, so he arrives early, which gets him into an argument in which he declares his hatred of society, using the old school friends as symbol of it. At the end the group go off without him to a secret brothel, and in his rage later that evening the Underground Man goes there to confront Zverkov once and for all, regardless if he is beaten or not. He arrives to find Zverkov and company have left, but it is there that he meets Liza, a young prostitute.

When Lisa first appears in *Notes from Underground*, her function seems clear: she is the object of the Underground Man's latest literary fantasy. He has absorbed the literary archetype of the redeemed prostitute and has cast himself as the hero who will rescue Liza. Later in the novel, however, her character becomes more complex. When we first meet her, she matches the stereotype of a young prostitute: bored, jaded, and somewhat naïve. When Liza is genuinely

moved by the Underground Man's speech, however, we realize that she may be even more innocent than expected. A young girl driven into prostitution by an uncaring family, she still idealises romantic love and longs for respect and affection. She treasures the one declaration of love she has received, a note from a young medical student who does not know she is a prostitute. The Underground Man is touched by the fact that Liza so clearly treasures this letter, but his attitude toward her emotion is somewhat dismissive.

We sense that Liza's sentiment could come from a less-educated version of the Underground Man's Romanticism and that her response to the Underground Man's speeches is shallow. Liza wants to participate in the artificial world the Underground Man creates with his 'sentimental' speeches, because she likes the idea of being a romantic heroine instead of an ordinary prostitute. When Liza responds tenderly and understandingly to the abusive speeches the Underground Man makes at his apartment, however, we see that she is closer to a real heroine than we may have expected. She is perceptive enough to see through the Underground Man's façade of cruelty and apathy, and she is good-hearted enough to try to give him comfort and love. When she finally realizes that the Underground Man is incapable of returning her love with anything but mockery and humiliation, she leaves with strength and dignity. She throws away the wad of bills that the Underground Man gives her as 'payment' for her visit, thwarting his attempt to treat her like a prostitute after she has come to him with help and love.

### **Dostoevsky's exiles**

The situation from which Dostoevsky's exiles start and which they either try to escape or affirm, is that of the alienation of modern man. Some try to escape this alienation by destroying the condition that crushes them, others by destroying themselves. Dostoevsky brings his exiles to the dead end of isolation and inauthentic existence. Yet he begins where they begin – with isolation and inner emptiness, the 'death of God' and the absence of an image of meaningful personal and social life. Dostoevsky's exiles carry their alienation with them in the contradictions and inner divisions of their own existence, which comprise the problematic of modern man.

This alienation is made fully explicit in Dostoevsky's novel. The Underground Man begins with a description of his own character that gives us a key to his philosophy. He presents himself as a divided man, and his division is always one of heights and depths. "The more aware I was of beauty and the highest and the best, the deeper I sank into my slime, and the more capable I became of immersing myself completely in it" (18). On the other hand, "The feeling of delight was there just because I was so intensely aware of my own degradation" (19). As a result of being more conscious, more intelligent, more aware than other people, he is not superior to them but infinitely inferior. Vain, suspicious, "as quick to take offence as a hunchback or a dwarf" (19), he would have derived positive pleasure from someone's slapping his face. But even this intense delight would be spoiled by the inevitable conclusion that it was his own fault to begin with: "I am to blame because, first of all, I am cleverer than anybody else around me...and because it would only have been a greater torment to me to realise its complete uselessness" (20).

The Underground Man does not feel inferior because he is inferior but because he is superior. This seeming contradiction is explained by the Underground Man himself when he speaks of the man of intense sensibility who considers himself a mouse and not a man: "I grant you it is an intensely conscious mouse, but it's a mouse all the same, whereas the other is a man" (21). The Underground Man cannot look anyone in the eyes because he is not himself a person and cannot meet others as persons. His superior cleverness is expended in endless introspection and fantasy and in a consciousness of himself and of others that reduces both to objects. His need to be a superman does not represent the strong position of the nonconformist, but the utter social dependence of the man who must compare himself with others in order to obtain any feeling of his own existence. The Underground Man is not really a self in the full sense of the term, someone who can stand his ground and meet others. He "is a consciousness and a social role" (Hubben 84). Hence, precisely in his need to be superior, he really is inferior to those persons who are men and not mice, and it is for this reason that he is ashamed before them.

The idiosyncratic anti-hero, who wills himself outside and in opposition to the norm, is presented on the very first page as determined by the moral and intellectual climate of his time. It would seem that the puny, nasty, spiteful official stands at the same time for the principle of pure caprice, hence free will, and for determinism, embodying in his person one of the oldest philosophical dilemmas:

the relation between freedom and necessity. We are hardly prepared to encounter the Underground Man in the role of philosopher, in particular as the man who expresses Dostoevsky's own philosophy. Yet the protest which he makes "against the utilitarian philosophy that accompanies the new era of mass industrialisation" (Friedman 153) is, one senses, Dostoevsky's own. "In my opinion consciousness is man's supreme misfortune. Consciousness is infinitely greater than, for example, two and two makes four" (41). The Underground Man doesn't approve of the laws of nature and arithmetic, "as though such a stone wall were really the same thing as peace of mind" (23). The stone wall is the objective reality that is foisted upon man in the name of science or society, but the Underground Man begins with the self, the knowing and experiencing subject, and he is willing to surrender the ground of objective reality even though consciousness means for him pain and un-lived life. "Can a man of acute sensibility respect himself at all?" (41) he asks, and confesses that he is horribly bored, crushed by doing nothing, reduced by intensified consciousness to thumb-twiddling. Where other people can stop at secondary causes, he must keep pursuing one cause after another till his life is dominated by inertia and complete inaction.

Yet for all that, he does not envy those who make human existence into a material affair. The 'gentlemen' to whom the Underground Man addresses his ironic confession believe that if man "were enlightened and if his eyes were opened to his own best, normal interests, he would cease to do evil and at once become virtuous and noble" (29). But the Underground Man believes otherwise:

One's own free and unfettered volition. One's own caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness – that is the one best and greatest good, which is never taken into consideration because it will not fit into any classification, and the omission of which always sends all systems and theories to the devil.  
(34)

This is a strong statement of freedom, the protest of a man against being transformed into a mere object to be played upon by external forces. The Underground Man goes to the other extreme, then, of absolute subjectivity and absolute freedom. The focal point of recapturing and retaining

freedom, for the Underground Man, is consciousness and will, seen from within: “The whole meaning of human life can be summed up in the one statement that man only exists for the purpose of proving to himself every minute that he is a man – a subject and not an object” (30).

Those who make the laws of logic into human laws reduce society to the “ant hill” (40) and life to death. Logic cannot of itself tell us what man is, for logic begins with abstraction and therefore leaves out the complexity of man. Seen from within, suffering is more precious than any Crystal Palace. The utilitarian calculus of the time left no meaning to human life outside the smooth economic and political functioning of society. This is the ‘ant-hill’ - the closed, collective society of organic unanimity. This universal ant-hill recurs in the ideal communist dictatorship – the reduction of society to the society of ants is the logical conclusion of the utilitarian standpoint, which sees men from the outside as objects constituted by external needs and interests rather than from within as persons. As the Underground Man so aptly puts it: “All respectable ants begin with the ant-hill, and they will probably end with it too” (40).

The philosophy of the Underground Man, like his confessions of his character and his life, can neither be taken at face value nor can it be discarded. Rather, we must remember who is speaking, that he is aware of his own insincerity, and, in so far as we can perceive this, why he says what he does. If in Part 1 the Underground Man was a mouse, in Part 2 he is a fly, and in both equally inhuman: “they looked on me as something in the nature of a very ordinary fly” (62).

Our great exponent of freedom and will reveals himself to us, in fact, as a person with neither freedom nor will. For two years, he tells us, he was preoccupied with how he might revenge his honour for the insult afforded him by the officer lifting him aside in a way that seemed a slight on his dignity. Finally, after endless fantasies of duels and fights when he brushes the shoulder of the officer as they pass on the street, he assumes that he has righted the balance, though the latter hardly notices. Perhaps the closest he comes to real existence is, after all, his brief encounter with Liza, and this is the experience that sticks in his mind years later and the one he must confess. He lives in a “funk hole” (21), a depressing set of rooms, with a butler who always embarrasses him by demanding his wages.

When he is visited by a former school friend, he takes advantage of the visit by asking for money and forcing his way into a small going-away party where he is obviously neither expected nor wanted. In the quarrel he gets into with the three others, he spends an hour pacing up and down in front of them while they eat; "Here it is, here it is at last, the encounter with reality. . . . All is lost now!" (84), he says to himself as he is running down the stairs in pursuit of his former school friends. Following the others on their way to a brothel, The Underground Man, after having humiliated himself, seeks either to receive an apology or to exact his revenge. He is elated and feels that his strange brand of masochism has finally brought him to the lowest possible position, and being in this position has made some kind of confrontation inevitable.

For someone as indecisive as the Underground Man, the thought of inevitability is reassuring. He is certain that the situation will resolve itself in some way, ending in either triumph or defeat. Either end will involve an "encounter with reality" (108). The Underground Man will finally be forced to participate in 'life', to interact with other human beings in a meaningful way. The Underground Man craves this kind of interaction, and every time he is faced with "some external event, no matter how small" (108), he thinks it is going to break the monotonous, lonely pattern of his life. This event promises to be monumental: a duel or a fistfight, or the adoring and apologetic friendship of a former enemy. It is telling that the Underground Man should think of this 'encounter with reality' in terms of violence. Anger, revenge and bitterness seem to be the only realistic ways in which he can conceive of interacting with others. Consequently, he imagines duels and arguments as the only way he can participate in the social world. The Underground Man's association of reality with violence and anger, pride and humiliation, foreshadows the failure of his relationship with Liza. He has no tools for friendship that do not involve aggression.

Arriving too late to catch up with his former school friends at the brothel, he goes in to sleep with a girl called Liza. After their intercourse, he describes to her the years that lie ahead of her. She will be kicked out of her house and sink to ever worse ones, or, if she is lucky, die of consumption in "a stinking corner of the cellar, in the damp and the darkness" (99), buried in a cheap coffin and visited by no one, remembered by no one:

Other women have children to visit their graves, fathers, husbands, but there will be neither tears nor sighs, nor any remembrance of you. No one, no one in the world will ever come to you. (99)

Within the bitterness of our anti-hero is a genuine note of sadness: the confession of inauthentic existence applies to his own present life quite as much as to the imagined future of the prostitute: "I lived, but I knew no real life" (19). Not to be remembered by others is here the tangible expression of not having existed at all. This is the only place in the novel where there is a direct emotion, the sincerity of which cannot be doubted. Yet it comes unawares, in the form of an admonishment of someone whom he wants to think of as much beneath him. In this whole story, in fact, his one moment of real human contact is with Liza, the girl whom he injures as much as he can.

"I sensed vaguely that she was going to pay dearly for it all" (113). In this quotation, the Underground Man remembers his reaction to Liza's arrival at his apartment. He has been shrieking with rage at his servant, Apollon, and is dressed in a ragged bathrobe. When Liza enters the apartment, the Underground Man "die[s] of shame" (105) and runs into his room in a panic. When he returns, he tries to appear dignified, but continues to feel extreme embarrassment. He is infuriated by Liza's patient, expectant stare, as he feels pressure to do something impressive to equal his speech in the brothel.

The Underground Man's humiliation is increased by the fact that in the brothel, when he was convincing Liza of the error of her ways, he felt enormous power over her. He felt he could manipulate her emotions, influence her choices about her own life, and control how she felt about herself and about him. He imagined that she admired and respected him. These feelings were particularly valuable to the Underground Man after his humiliation at Zverkov's farewell dinner. Now he has lost his temper in front of Apollon, the one person over whom he feels he should have some control. The Underground Man therefore feels particularly powerless, imagining he has lost all respect and dignity in Liza's eyes. He holds her responsible for the fact that she has seen him in this miserable situation. Her presence has made him aware of the shabbiness of his bathroom, his apartment, of his entire existence. In this way, the Underground Man transfers the responsibility for all of his unhappiness to Liza's shoulders. Just as he can turn his hatred of others toward himself,

he can turn his hatred of himself toward others, especially when they are weaker, poorer, and less respectable than he.

Although he invited Liza to come and see him, this is the last thing he wants when the “disgusting truth” about all “those horrors and commiserations of last night” (102) begins to blaze through his memory. “Again to assume that dishonest, lying mask – again, again!” Fifteen years later, he confesses, he still sees in his mind’s eye “the same pitiful, inappropriate smile” (103) on Liza’s face that he saw that night. Yet Liza does come to see him, and at the worst possible time. Unable to forgive her for coming in on him then, he answers her pathetic confession that she wants “to leave...that place altogether” (114) by upbraiding her for coming, and by reducing his own motives to sheer sado-masochism.

“I had to be revenged on somebody for the insult and get my own back; so I vented my fury on you, and had a good laugh. I had been humiliated, so I wanted to humiliate somebody else; I had been treated like dirt, so I wanted to show my power” (115). It is only once in a lifetime that a man speaks his mind like this, he says, but in the hysteria that ensues a still deeper confession erupts from the depths. They throw themselves in each other’s arms, and he sobs as he has never sobbed before in his life: “they give me no...I’m incapable of being...good!” (117). Underneath his hatred is his basic sense of alienation. He cannot be himself and be accepted and confirmed by others. Somewhere along the line he has come to feel himself confronted by the impossible choice between not being himself in order to be what others want him to be, on the one hand, and being himself and doing without the confirmation of others, on the other. To be both himself and good is impossible. Hence he must both criticise the ‘gentlemen’ and depreciate himself, striking now outward, now inward.

What the Underground Man really wants is that Liza disappear. She is too real a contact with the existence to which he has turned his back. “I longed for peace. I wanted to be left alone in my funk hole” (118). The Underground Man is making a confession from ‘hell’, the little world that he has built for himself to take the place of the real world. Their roles are now changed, he realises, and he is ashamed to look at her. Because he is ashamed, and because he wants to dominate her instead of she him, he makes love to her as a sort of vengeance, an expression of “a personal,

jealous hatred of her" (118). Then he grins at her maliciously until she leaves of her own accord, and, to add a final insult, he presses money into her hand, as if to say that he had been using her all along as a prostitute. "I did that cruel thing deliberately", he confesses, prompted by brain not heart. It was "so insincere...so deliberately invented, so bookish" (120) that even he can't stand it and runs after her. But she has already disappeared.

His analysis of that moment is as much a product of the underground as the story itself. He wants to run after her in order "to fall on his knees before her, to sob with remorse" (120). Yet the next moment he had already found a rationalisation. He would only torture her, and is it not better for her anyway to carry away a purifying insult that will elevate her through suffering! "Which is better: cheap happiness or exalted suffering?" (120), he theorises. The painful self-irony of this whole passage cannot remove the disturbing questions that it raises. What are we to think now of the whole of the first part in which consciousness and suffering are put forward as the only truly desirable human goals while cheap happiness is scorned?

The series of problematic characters that Dostoevsky presents to us in his novels embody the points of greatest tension between forces of destruction and forces of integration, between compulsion and freedom, between alienation and rebellion. Behind these points of tension, in every case, stands the figure of the Underground Man. He is the divided man who, in probing to the depths finds conflict rather than any single unified self. He is the man who lives out the full tension of psychological compulsion and personal freedom. He is the exile who condemns himself to still greater exile. In the story the Underground Man tells, suffering is so distorted that it is impossible to affirm suffering as a human good, much less as the chief human good that he has made it. The Underground Man glorifies this suffering not because it purifies and exalts, for it does neither, but because it offers the relief that comes from having reached the bottom. He is only happy when he has made himself so utterly miserable that he can exchange the shameful and complex misery of being a 'rat' for the ecstasy of complete degradation. This is Dostoevsky's affirmation of suffering and consciousness. It is this ambivalence which is key to the connection between the two parts of *Notes from the Underground*.

The Underground Man is the man whose subjective existence is more threatened than the 'gentlemen' to whom he speaks with such irony. They may have founded their scale of values on logical exercises, but, unlike him, they have a hold on and a ground in real existence. The abortive contact with Liza is as close as he can come to actual existence, and this ends in stupid cruelty and sadness. The Underground Man wants to be left in peace in his funk hole to indulge his fantasy life, through which he can continually rectify the unrectifiable abjectness of his real position in regard to men: "I could not even imagine any place of secondary importance for myself, and for that very reason I quite contentedly occupied the most significant one in real life. Either a hero or dirt – there was no middle way" (41). Wallowing in dirt, he consoles himself with being a hero, suffering attacks of the 'sublime and beautiful' precisely during his spells of dissipation when he is touching bottom. It is not, indeed, that others necessarily treat him like dirt, but since he feels like dirt, and since he acts in relation to others in such a way as to force them to maltreat him, he is repeatedly confirmed in the view that he has of himself, and this in turn reinforces the grandiosity of his fantasy life.

This fantasy and detachment, this suppression of all inter-subjective life in favour of an existence 'underground', is precisely what makes necessary his rejection of the mathematical abstractions of those who see men in terms of enlightened self-interest. So far from being expressions of free will, his actions are of a compulsiveness that destroys all spontaneity. His every act originates in his fear of the way others regard him. All that is left of his humanity, his personhood, is his isolated subjective consciousness, and this he feels constantly threatened by the crushing weight of the social and the objective. He is perhaps as close to the border as one can get, and still remain in touch. For the sake of his very existence, therefore, he must strike out at what would deny his humanity and transform him into an "organ-stop" (41). This does not mean that this 'anti-hero' and his philosophy with him are to be dismissed as merely neurotic. On the contrary, in him a process has worked itself out that is equally present, if hidden, in the 'gentlemen' to whom he speaks – the consequences of having no direction toward authentic existence. The Underground Man has carried consciousness and subjectivity to the absurd extreme where they have no real reference to anything outside themselves; the 'gentlemen' have objective social structures and objective social values without any real subjective existence. Neither have any share in real life. "We have all lost touch in life", asserts the Underground Man, "we are cripples, every one of us – more or less" (50).

And again, “we do our best to be some theoretical ‘average’ men. We are stillborn” (50). The empty socialite and the exiled neurotic are two sides of the same coin. The rebellion of the Underground Man forces those who are not exiled to discover the alienation from authentic existence that lies at the very heart of their situation. We cannot accept his philosophy at face value, for he is neurotic. He has taken freedom and subjectivity to the point where they destroy all possible human existence. Yet his protest is a valid one, and his philosophy is a meaningful part of that protest.

### **Inwardness**

Dostoevsky never had to think of inwardness as a new experience for which a special term was required. He wrote from within a metaphysical era, and many of his Russian contemporaries knew well the inner tensions known also, and of specific significance, to Kierkegaard. To modern ears there may be something unscientific in Kierkegaard’s insistence that “inwardness be understood as subjectivity” (Hubben 35). He had chosen this word aggressively as the way calculated to mark off two opposing ways in which an individual can see himself. The objective knower is impartial, and therefore to be trusted; the subjective knower knows only himself, and cannot be trusted to say anything of universal significance. Kierkegaard would have admitted this, and yet he felt that subjectivity or inwardness was a lost habit which it was “his mission to restore” (Berdyayev 172). He saw a connection between inwardness and the Socratic dialectic, for Socrates too had pursued truth for the sake of personal edification, knowledge for the sake of virtue, understanding for the sake of an idea that a man can live by. And for Socrates also man must ultimately be understood in terms of a God-relationship, to Law, Justice, the Good. If inwardness is a “metaphysical tension within the soul” (Hubben 37), it is clearly not original with Kierkegaard. He was, however, the first to speak in philosophical language of the scope of this tension. Kierkegaard’s solitude is the solitude of the single one who knows he is a sinner, and who is doubly lonely because he knows inwardness while others do not.

Because inwardness is consciousness of a certain kind of tension, it can be spoken of both as subjectivity, introspection, and as a dynamic encounter between finite and infinite. And this is what Kierkegaard does. One moment he is stressing the introspection, and another moment he is making much of the despairing, guilty character of the encounter. To be subjective is, for

Kierkegaard, ultimately to be aware that “as against God we are always in the wrong” (quoted in Hubben 38).

Yet there is another aspect of subjectivity which Kierkegaard did not go into, but which we can see in Dostoevsky’s novels. Dostoevsky’s heroes and heroines are similarly concerned with the question of God. Dostoevsky explained the search and the tension in one way, Kierkegaard in another. Perhaps the difference is simply that for Kierkegaard the tension always represents a conflict between the creature and the judgement of the creator, between guilt and passion, while for the Underground Man there can be no longing at all. These figures recognise the misery of their self-isolation, and the Underground Man knows he is miserable without God. Moreover, other Dostoevsky characters do yearn for an infinite being in whom they do not yet believe but who represents the binding life force in all things. This does not do complete justice to Kierkegaard. For when he speaks of his hope of introducing inwardness in the life of the individual, he means that he would like the individual to see life as a tension between an instinct for happiness and the impossibility of being happy as long the pursuit is for something from outside. Man is always on trial, and “the judge is interior man himself” (Macquarrie 20), as he sentences himself for failing to measure up to the universal requirements of a human being. Dostoevsky’s heroes never get to a place where their reason can accept that for which their hearts long. For that matter, Dostoevsky did not think that men ever break loose from self-will after they have chosen God, but rather, if they are to break loose at all, before they have made this choice. Dostoevsky was convinced that we believe in order to understand.

### **The question of the sufferer**

My life was gloomy, untidy, and barbarously solitary. (47)

To be subjective is to be subjected, not only to the authority of infinite over finite, but to self-love of the finite. Kierkegaard’s introspection had both aspects. But in Dostoevsky’s novels they are separated, handed over to different sorts of heroes: those who know the agony of self-enclosure, and those who are miserable without God. Even here there is a difference. The spirit broods more glowingly in Dostoevsky’s characters just because they are so troubled by their inability to be free

of themselves. They know what they do, and love and hate simultaneously. Their wills are in bondage and they suffer. There may be worse ways of suffering, but this curious ambivalence of the will is open to some men who cannot suffer in any other way.

Kierkegaard said that whoever suffers for the doctrine also dies to the world and is, as a result, raised above his fellows in lonely honour. Dostoevsky was equally sure that whoever suffers from paralysis of will is also separated from other men; he will die. Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky plead for readers who will understand them and 'accept suffering'. Kierkegaard too showed little interest in non-artistic, non-metaphysical agonies. He warmly sympathised, however, with the "anguish of a man isolated by sin or doctrine", namely a man like himself (Essack 91). Dostoevsky, on the other hand, believed that by accepting suffering a man may stop judging others from the easy distance of self-concern. Then the mutual responsibility of mankind will appear. The torment of the Underground Man discharges the secret tensions of inwardness, and Dostoevsky's novels are kept moving not only by the promise of disclosure of some unknown future, but by the hope of learning some secret of character as well. The reader learns the secret which the hero holds within him at the moment the hero confesses to someone else.

In inwardness man meets God, not as equals meet, but what Kierkegaard calls "meeting unequals; finite with infinite" (quoted in Essack 92). In misery and in longing the characteristic resonances of inwardness play their tunes. Dostoevsky, seeing that the universe and man, reason and truth, are incompatible and the human situation forlorn, urged his readers to stake all on an Infinite Chance, the God of Charity. Dostoevsky's inwardness takes the form of brooding, and differs from Kierkegaard. In fact, Dostoevsky's characters hardly ever come to the point of final commitment. Although Kierkegaard could not break out of his own self-isolation completely, he had no trouble deciding whether he should, or whether God exists. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, claiming no personal mystical experiences, persisted throughout his writings to ask whether there is a God at all.

The outsider experiences in inwardness an intimacy. Is it not ironic that the outsider who wished to put his contemporaries on trial should end by finding himself on trial instead? The Underground Man does not have a proper name; he could be anyone living in the same circumstances. In fact,

the author insists in a note, the Underground Man “not only may but positively must exist in our society” (Hubben 17), when we consider the circumstances in the midst of which our society is formed. He is one of the representatives of a generation still living. These ‘notes’ are autobiographical in tone, and the reader gets involved in the emotions of the narrator without intending to, for they are so embarrassingly uninhibited.

The Underground Man is a civil servant, a bachelor without friends. He was practically an orphan, and treated badly at school. He has a habit of humiliating himself before others in order to be noticed. He speaks of himself as sick from the inertia and over-consciousness of his time. The Underground Man does not bother with doctors; he already knows what is ailing him and knows there is no cure. Spite keeps him going. Because no one thing or person is repressing him, he cannot vent his spite in a concentrated way. We could call his brooding consciousness the repressed inwardness of one who should be able to see his situation in terms of the infinite judgement of God or of human love. The Underground Man himself certainly does not see it this way. He does not even know why his age is the age of over-consciousness. Nor does he connect inertia with the socio-political conditions of his life and of Russia in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Underground Man has “dreams of faith, hope, love, the good and the beautiful” (18). He says, “it is worth noting that these attacks of the good and the beautiful visited me even during the period of dissipation and just at the times when I was touching the bottom” (19) This is a simultaneity of good and evil. The Underground Man’s spite is not pretence. He really is spiteful. But he does not resent other people being more distinguished than himself; he resents their indifference to him. He resents living in a world where there is no place for him. He does not resent other persons, he resents the fact that he cannot be taken for a person too, and not just as a minor official in an office. He does not care for somebody else’s notions of what is to his advantage. As far as he can understand his wants, all he needs is to act freely. But we can see that he is not dependent on anyone. All he owns is his pride, and the refusal to succumb to what is expected of him.

The Underground Man would like to demonstrate his independence and at the same time be recognised, without giving anything of himself, by crushing someone else who would, if he cared, crush him. But the young blood he tested this on pushed him aside without noticing him. What such

a lonely pride needs is a love that will both comfort him with recognition and attract his energies away from self-isolation. The prostitute Liza, who comes to him with gratitude and love, only draws on herself the malice of a weak man who has become so wounded by the anonymity of his life and spitefulness that his only possible relationship to someone else is treating her as he has been treated, as a thing. Love comes to him, and he realises his need for it, too late. Too late he runs after her in the street, to “ask her for forgiveness” (120). And yet in his misery he never doubts that even had he found her, he would have treated her spitefully again. Spite is his way of life. The Underground Man never speaks of God, and he does not say he wants to be loved. The Underground Man cannot reach out for the right solution to his predicament, and he knows this.

The Underground Man, conscious of his own emptiness and isolation, resents himself as well as his society. Having no experience of a society which is a community rather than a bureaucracy, how could he be expected to surrender to anyone when the opportunity comes? He can respond only with the character that his society expects of him, anonymously, without regard for personal feelings. When he says that he cannot think of love except as tyrannizing someone else, we understand that he is not likely to learn from a prostitute. The Underground Man is Dostoevsky's first serious diabolic character, the first to make a self-conscious attempt to define his own fate. But he does not yet know all the terms of reference of this fate. He has not been able to see his situation more clearly because no one else can either. Without a shared experience, or shared inquiry, without a more developed philosophical preparation, man is left with the “only measure he does possess, his pride” (Friedman 217). The next best course then is the one the Underground Man takes, the destructive and self-destructive career of resentment, revenge, sado-masochism. In the society in which Dostoevsky was living, it was not unusual to say that nihilism is the only way of preserving one's self-respect. Brombert claims that the novel expresses a leaning towards the abyss of nihilism which appears for the first time in literature and represents a course that romantic isolation as a whole took (219). In Dostoevsky's novels, however, it was a carefully designed response to the anonymity of life in a disintegrating society.

The Underground Man, in the name of over-consciousness, objects to being bound, in an age of reflection, to what is rational, which is what is expected of him. He does not want to be “some sort of impossible, generalised man” (41). He says that men in his day are oppressed at being men –

men with real individual body and blood. He objects not only to the nineteenth century, but objects to civilisation itself. In this manner the Underground Man's brooding is the closest he can get to real inwardness. He knows life as a series of situations in which recognition and meaning are for unexplained reasons missing. He keeps his head clear by supplying his own justification, acting the stranger at the same time he feels remorseful for being so. But his characteristic resentment indicates that he has an instinct for a different kind of life in which spite would be neither possible nor necessary. He does not bring such a life to the front of his mind where he could have it to choose or reject. He rejects Liza, an opportunity, not a way of life.

The Underground Man's paradoxes are not whims of some half-mad eccentric, but a revelation of man about man. The consciousness of the angry mouse, crushed in the underground, proves to be human consciousness in general. We are hitting upon the enigma of consciousness. A man becomes a man if he possesses self-consciousness. Without it, man seems less than human. But self-consciousness arises only out of conflict with reality, from a breach with the world. It must pass through isolation and solitude. It is pain. On the other hand, solitary consciousness does not exist as it is always joined with all mankind. In this tormenting contradiction is the tragedy of personality. The acutely developed personality thrusts itself back from the world, desperately upholds its self-legitimacy, and at the same time is attracted to people and understands its dependence on them.

Consciousness is destined for greater exploits. It is in itself an act, a human act, a lively, full act which manifests itself in literary works. This novel examines creativity in the realm of language where existentialism is presented as a theory of human possibility. There is growth of being in every instance of awareness. This awareness allows the author's soul to discover the creativity in consciousness common to all true writing and literature.

## Chapter 3

### **Franz Kafka – The Trial**

#### **Introduction**

Someone must have traduced Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning. (*The Trial* 1925)

Thus begins a book which, while it never brings to light even the most trivial offence for which K. might have been arrested and punished, increasingly places in question the unambiguous insistence of the hero that he is simply the innocent victim of injustice. K. is arrested on his thirtieth birthday and executed on his thirty-first, and the suggestion is that his 'trial' is not a judgement on what he has specifically done or left undone, but a judgement on his life itself. How can he escape this accusation, this anxiety? Perhaps by living in a new world of being, by confronting the powers he fears, the terrifying aspect of the original absolute world. Joseph K. would have to assume his personal destiny and understand the call that comes from the depths of "the mutilated, travestied being" (Swander 150). The world outside of man is dull and cold, possessing neither significance nor value. It is therefore crucial to confer value upon it, for it is man's freedom, his creative impulse to bestow meaning (man is after all the only creativity there is). This hidden authentic self is all-powerful; it is found behind all unforeseen acts which drag Joseph K. from the regular paths he had been passively following before his arrest.

While possessed of a profound desire to live in a community, K. stands on the border between solitude and sociality. He is torn by conflicting choices. No matter what he chooses, he still sins and is forced to punish himself. He seems to be on the side of his executioners, as he is overcome by pity for the inspectors who have arrested and robbed him; and he goes back to the court although he has not been summoned. This anguish dominates his life, his sleep. He is the culprit and the judge. What is the way out of this stalemate? How could he make a choice? There is no more divine norm, for God has turned away from the earth. The Law is no longer understood, life is absurd, and Joseph K., like Camus's *The Stranger*, has the experience of total superfluousness.

He regards his arrest as a “ridiculous nothingness” (16). He has a vague feeling of contingency and looks for judges to justify his existence. He does not possess the strength to stand up and to assume a solitude which frightens him. He would like to be integrated into a hierarchy. These are vain hopes, for the judges he meets are subordinate, corrupt judges.

If concern for human existence in its concrete reality makes one an ‘existentialist,’ then Kafka is most distinctly an existentialist. Kafka does not start with any absolute or with the assumption of the death of God, but with human existence itself. Kafka’s world is not a transparent one through which we can glimpse some other, more familiar reality. It is just what it is in its irreducible opaqueness and absurdity. Nevertheless, Kafka’s novel has a curiously abstract quality, almost too abstract for us to speak of Kafka as offering us an image of man in the same sense as, for example, Dostoevsky does. Kafka’s heroes are never full-dimensional, human beings, and his stories never seem to have the ring of everyday reality, no matter how detailed and circumstantial they may be. It is perhaps this that tempts one to see his stories as parables pointing to universal truths through abstractions. Maurice Friedman in his book *Problematic Rebel* writes that the key to Kafka is perhaps a “sense of caricature” (287). He explains: “If one feels that one recognises reality in Kafka, one always feels at the same time that it is a reality that is somehow caricatured” (287).

The form of Kafka’s story is, in a sense its meaning. The story does not refer to the direct reality of the person and situation as we see in Dostoevsky, but rather the distortion indicates a way of seeing. Kafka does not substitute general views for his concrete perception of existence, his mode is almost too individual and strong to enable him to communicate the real complexity and uniqueness of people and situations. Yet one’s feeling that the central figure is in some sense Kafka himself, combined with the powerful way in which Kafka invites us into the character’s existence, makes his characters caricatured. Kafka saw himself as by his “essential nature, a reserved, silent, unsocial dissatisfied person” (*The Diaries of Kafka* 105). Kafka did not see this unsocial nature as a misfortune, however, but as “the reflection of my goal” (105). Kafka not only saw himself as a lonely exile, he saw himself as essentially lonelier and more in exile than anyone else. He states: “I shun people not because I want to live quietly but because I want to die quietly” (168).

Albert Camus wrote: "The whole art of Kafka consists in forcing the reader to reread" (quoted in Eilittä 147). *The Trial* is so vague and mysterious that many interpretations are possible. As one is faced with Kafka's work, one feels uneasy, disoriented. The very form and structure of the novel escapes classification and transports us to an atmosphere of hallucination and strange disquiet. There seems to be no apparent continuity in this world. Joseph K is often thought of as Kafka's 'shadow' in as much as the author of *The Trial* and his hero are both obsessed by strange visions which haunt their sleep. How can one rid oneself of these agonising images that inhabit the most diverse layers of the unconscious, and which are ready to rise to the surface the instant awareness of reality appears? Psycho-analysis tells us that this can be done by an "effort of the consciousness which brings these images out into the light" (Buber 16). And that is precisely what Kafka seems to do. "Literary composition was for him a sort of catharsis" (18), says Buber. That is why *The Trial* is a plunge into the night, a long nightmare which takes us through the stifling atmosphere of the darkest regions of the self.

Joseph K is arrested one morning after getting up. This is the hour, according to Kafka's *Diary*, when "healthy men disperse the phantoms of the night" (156). But with K., "the phantoms return as the night wears on, and in the morning they are all there, only they are not recognizable" (157). Thus K.'s arrest is the beginning of a nightmare or, more exactly, of a series of nightmares. The action, therefore, takes place in his soul, and the plot can perhaps be seen as symbolic of manifest or repressed tendencies. The characters of *The Trial*, whether they argue with K. or agree with him, are aspects of his consciousness. The novel is a dialogue the writer seems to have with himself. It is perhaps not by chance that one of the police inspectors actually bears the name 'Franz'. Kafka himself was never a sound sleeper, and was burdened with unsettling nocturnal visions. In dreams, a person can become aware of the deep antagonisms which tear one's being apart. Perhaps these night-time visions can explain the alogical composition of the novel. Dreams occur at night – in other words, during those hours when the activities of daily toil no longer spread a protective screen of tasks over the unconscious. That is why Joseph K is summoned to court either at night or on Sundays. Furthermore, Joseph K. knows very well that this mishap could not have happened to him at the office. "In the bank, for instance, I am always prepared," said Joseph K.:

Nothing of that kind could possibly happen to me there. I have my own attendant, the general telephone and the office telephone stand before me on my desk, people keep coming in to see me, clients and clerks, and above all, my mind is always on my work and so kept on the alert. (56)

What, then, are these long, stifling corridors leading nowhere, these ghostlike judges in dark attics, if not the nocturnal universe of Kafka and by extension, Joseph K.? This is the climate in which the novel unfolds. The unconscious opens the door to this world. The reading and interpretation of this novel perhaps involves therefore traces of the extent to which the problems of life inspired Kafka.

### **Brief Overview**

In *The Trial*, Joseph K. is accused. But he doesn't know what he is accused of. He is doubtless eager to defend himself, but he doesn't know why. The lawyers find his case difficult. Meanwhile he does not neglect to love, to eat, or to read his paper. Then he is judged. But the courtroom is very dark. He doesn't understand much. He merely assumes he is condemned, but to what, he barely wonders. At times he suspects, but at the same he continues living. Some time later, two well-dressed and polite gentlemen come to get him and invite him to follow them. Most courteously they lead him to a wretched suburb, put his head on a stone and slit his throat. The suddenness and unexpectedness of this makes it that much more powerful. As Camus stated in *Myth of Sisyphus*: "An actor lends more force to a tragic character the more careful he is not to exaggerate it. If he is moderate, the horror he inspires will be immoderate" (quoted in Swander 110).

*The Trial* is a series of loosely connected or unconnected incidents. Fräulein Bürnster is never heard of again after the first chapter until she is dimly glimpsed in the last; the warders who were to accompany K. everywhere are soon forgotten; the uncle, the advocate, the commercial traveller Block, the painter Titorelli emerge and fade, the prison chaplain supersedes them, and not once does K. or the author reflect on any connection or contrast between them. The structure of *The Trial* is therefore not fixed. It is almost as if there are several chapters that are interchangeable. It is difficult to trace a continuous thread. Is this an indication that one should abandon all attempts at

finding a logically developed, plausible plot? If we are not, indeed to abandon such attempts, our first step is to question the arrangement of the chapters. Looking at the first four chapters, we soon discover a relationship between Chapters 1 and 4 so intimate as to suggest that Chapter 4 should actually appear between Chapters 1 and 2.

In Chapter 1, on the evening of the day of Joseph K's arrest, he argues angrily with his landlady, Frau Grubach, over her suspicions concerning Fräulein Bürnster, with whom he would like to become better acquainted. Then follows the conversation with Fräulein Bürnster in her room at 11:30 that night, abruptly interrupted by their realisation that the landlady's nephew, the Captain, is an involuntary eavesdropper. This realisation evokes anxiety in Fräulein Bürnster, and in Joseph K. vague feelings of guilt and concern. Now Chapter 4 – as shown by indications of time, events that occur, and the emotional state of the protagonists – constitutes a direct continuation of this incident. It begins with the information that “in the next few days K. found it impossible to exchange even a word with Fräulein Bürnster” (18). At first he refuses to speak to Frau Grubach, but on Sunday he ends his sulking. In doing so he relieves the suspense under which she has lived, fearing that he was permanently angry; and he discovers that the Captain has betrayed nothing to her about the conversation with Fräulein Bürnster, thus dispelling his own fear on that score. These two questions raised in Chapter 1 are, then, resolved in Chapter 4, and Frau Grubach's statement in 4 “I kept asking myself” (47), ties in directly with Chapter 1. Furthermore, K. meets the Captain for the first time in Chapter 4 – “this was the first time that K. had seen him close at hand” (48) – a fact which is difficult to explain if there are more than a few days between the two chapters; for otherwise K. would surely have met him previously in the small boarding house, where “on Sunday almost all the boarders had their midday dinner” (22).

It becomes clear as the novel develops that Joseph K.'s mistake was to accept that there is a case against him at all. He submits to the arrest with a mixture of docility and outrage, an attitude that will influence much of his behaviour and thus contribute to his failure. He alternates between insulting the warders and inspector, and attempting to appease them. When he receives a call summoning him to a first interrogation, he goes readily, although he behaves with contempt towards the people gathered to hear his interrogation. The following week, he shows up without having been summoned, just in case. It is important to note that at no time during the novel does

Joseph, or the reader, learn what he is accused of. However, this detail gradually loses importance as the story progresses, a fact that should provoke outrage in both characters and readers. Once Joseph K. accepts his case, he is absorbed into a system he can never hope to understand or manipulate. Finding himself in the disconcerting position of being 'arrested but free', he first sets about attempting to clear the mysterious charges brought against him. Later on, when he realizes this is impossible, he spends his remaining days trying to push his case through the courts.

The Courts of Law responsible for the endless cases against Joseph K. and countless others are a muddle of impenetrable rules and bureaucratic dead ends. Court officials have a very limited understanding of the cases they're supposed to be working on. The Courts themselves are housed in the attics of rundown buildings. Joseph K. decides to take an active approach in confronting this system. His visits to the Court attics are frustrated by his inability to obtain any information or to even find his way around. Nevertheless, he keeps trying, and by the end of the novel he has dismissed his lawyer and taken the full load of the casework upon himself. Joseph K. fails to accept not only his own role in his case, but also the roles of others. The Court system operates in a confusing way, where the people who should know the most actually know the least, while it is the apparent outsiders who seem to understand the workings of the Law. Therefore, it is not the lawyer who is most valuable, but rather his young maid Leni, who knows many of his clients intimately. The Judges are virtually useless, but the artist whom they commission to paint their portraits has a great deal of influence in the Courts. Joseph realises this from the beginning, however, he repeatedly rejects offers of help from these individuals, refusing to believe that their knowledge and influence surpass that of the Court officials and lawyers. The end of the novel finds him isolated and helpless and his willingness to go to his own execution is disconcerting.

### **The problem of guilt**

Buber writes that *The Trial* represents two different but closely connected situations of human history from which its author suffered: the one the uncanny negative certainty that "human values are beginning to shatter", and the other concerned with the question of whether "world-meaning and world-order still have any connection at all with this nonsense and this disorder of the human world" (124). *The Trial* is therefore about the world breaking in on the self. In this novel the focus

up to a certain point is on the hero, Joseph K., after which it is on the Court that 'tries' him and finally on how he meets the accusation of the Court. The central problem of *The Trial*, that of guilt, cannot be referred simply to K.'s subjectivity, nor to the frighteningly irregular and corrupt bureaucracy that has him in its 'clutches,' but to the encounter between the two. The world of Joseph K. gradually changes from the everyday business world that he takes for granted into a mysterious hierarchy that wraps itself around the whole of reality until it finally crushes him to death – and does so with his compliance.

Kafka confronts not only a neurotic guilt but also a real guilt that arises as a consequence of one's personal situation and one's personal responsibility. Martin Buber writes that existential guilt is "guilt that a person has taken on himself as a person and in a personal situation" (123). It is not merely guilty feelings but an objective reality. As Buber explains:

Existential guilt occurs when someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognises as those of his own existence and of all common human existence. (126)

When he is told that the Law does not hunt for crime but is drawn to the guilty, K. says, "I don't know this Law", to which the warder who has arrested him replies, "All the worse for you" (16). When K. then says, "And it probably exists nowhere but in your head", the warder responds, "you'll come up against it yet" (16), while the other warder comments, "See, Willem, he admits that he doesn't know the Law and yet he claims he's innocent" (17). K's very guilt, we may surmise, lies in the fact that he does not know the Law, that his life is closed to the hearing of the Law.

Joseph K. has successfully created a life which excludes listening to the self. Between the meaningless routine of his work at the Bank, where he is the chief clerk, and the meaningless routine of his bachelor pleasures, there is no room for any kind of self-examination. This is the case with life before his arrest:

That spring K. had been accustomed to pass his evenings in this way: after work whenever possible - he was usually in his office until nine – he would take a short

walk, alone or with some of his colleagues, and then go to a beer hall, where until eleven he sat at a table patronised mostly by elderly men. (23)

It is also the case after his 'arrest', when he cannot bring himself to take the time needed for recalling his past life in detail:

But now, when K. should be devoting his mind entirely to work, when every hour was hurried and crowded – for he was still in full career and rapidly becoming a rival even to the Assistant Manager – when his evenings and nights were all too short for the pleasures of bachelor life, this was the time when he must sit down to such a task! (46)

Since K. is allowed to carry on his business as usual after his arrest, and since he “cannot recall the slightest offence that might be charged against him” (16), he begins by dismissing his arrest as an affair of no great importance. The warders cannot say if he is charged with any offence, but they advise him: “Think less about us and of what is going to happen to you, think more about yourself instead” (19). This advice directs us away from any specific guilt on K's part to his existence as such. When he goes to his first interrogation, he makes a point of arriving late and does not listen at all to anything anyone else might have to say. He speaks with an arrogant tone of superiority that presumes a knowledge of the Court that he cannot have:

Behind all the actions of this court of justice...there is a great organisation at work...And the significance of this great organisation gentlemen? It consists in this, that innocent persons are accused of guilt, and senseless proceedings are put in motion against them, mostly without effect, it is true, as in my own case. (57)

The significance of K.'s ignorance of the Law – of his having no time for hearing and for self-examination – is indicated not merely by the routine character of his work and his pleasures, but still more by his attempt to turn his whole existence into one of professional smoothness and efficiency, excluding any part of him that might lose control. What makes his arrest a special

nightmare to him is that it comes to him when he is unprepared, at home, in bed, not ready to master the situation with the smooth professional skill that does not involve himself personally: "In the Bank...I am always prepared, nothing of that kind could possibly happen to me there" (56).

Throughout the opening stages of the trial, K. preserves the demeanour of the detached observer who is somehow not really involved in his own case. While other people seem to him mad and incomprehensible, he is always sane and cool. By the same token, he is constantly impelled to contrast the orderly nature of his own life and the disorderly character of the Court. In the course of his trial, however, K. meets other businessmen who at first thought they could conduct their cases in the same way they conducted their businesses. When he sees a roomful of defendants in the Law Court offices, he is struck by the contrast between the professional sureness of these men before the outer world and their deep unsureness before the court. He asks a man nearest to him what he is waiting for, and this man immediately becomes confused and undone:

Which was the more deeply embarrassing as he was obviously a man of the world who would have known how to comport himself anywhere else and would not lightly have renounced his natural superiority. (79)

Yet neither this experience, nor the warning of the Examining Magistrate that by his behaviour at the first interrogation he has "flung away with [his] own hand all the advantages which an interrogation invariably confers on an accused man" (56), serve to change his determination to meet his problem only with professional competence, as if it were a mere business problem, not one involving, as it so clearly does, his very existence as a human being. The conclusion that he draws from this is that what is needed is the sort of strengthening of self-confidence through what is preached to businessmen as the key to success: "The right tactics were to avoid letting one's thoughts stray to one's own possible shortcomings, and to cling as firmly as one could to the thought of one's advantage" (80). The Court would encounter in him a formidable opponent, a man with 'know-how'. A more important clue to the attitude which leads K. to try to master his trial as a business deal, and completely deny any guilt, is the written defence that he thinks of drawing up when he finally does turn his attention to his case:

He had often considered whether it would not be better to draw up a written defence and hand it in to the Court. In this defence he would give a short account of his life, and when he came to an event of any importance explain for what reasons he had acted as he did, intimate whether he approved or condemned his way of action in retrospect, and adduce grounds for the condemnation or approval. (100)

It is clear from this passage that K. wishes to reduce the question of his guilt to a sum of external actions, that he wishes to see himself, in fact, as accountable only in his actions and not as a person. But everything in *The Trial* suggests that it is not his detached actions but precisely his existence which is on trial, and that his insistence on regarding his life as no more than the sum of his actions is itself, perhaps, his chief guilt.

K.'s guilt, in other words, so far as we can glimpse it, is neither legal nor social, but existential. This means that he is accountable as a person and not just as someone who fulfils a social role. When the novel opens he knows his existence only as that of the chief clerk of the Bank. He is drawn from the social confirmation that such a role gives him to the solitude in which he has to face his trial as the person he is, with no help from others. His 'arrest' has forced him to become aware of a personal dimension of existence that he would never have noticed of his own free will. He learns the hard way that "combined action against the Court is impossible. Each case is judged on its own merits" (42). He not only speaks in the name of the general public, but at the first interrogation tries to aid his cause through winning over a significant part of the audience to his side. When he discovers that both the parties of the Right and of the Left have identical badges, he sees this as a conspiracy against him:

So! Cried K., flinging his arms in the air, his sudden enlightenment had to break out, every, man jack of you is an official, I see, you are yourselves the corrupt agents of whom I have been speaking. (59)

This situation can be interpreted in quite a different way, however, namely, that the men with whom K. comes in contact cannot be his allies, since he has built his life on the exclusion of the reality of

other people and wants to relate to them only in so far as he has gained mastery over them. Every person who meets him is a potential judge, for that person has a reality quite alien to his own existence, one that confronts his existence and calls it into question.

The situation of K., who is torn out of the security of his social role into the anxiety of personal accountability, is to some extent the situation of every man who at one time or another in his life suddenly finds himself standing alone, without those supports of family, position, and name that are so familiar to him that he has come to take them for granted. So, too, every man stands, whether he knows it or not, in a continuous personal accountability so long as he lives. If one thinks of guilt not in the legal but in personal and existential terms, then it becomes impossible to say, as K. says, that one is completely innocent. The question of whether one's existence is authentic or inauthentic cannot be answered by the sum of one's actions, as K wishes, nor by any objective standard that detaches guilt from one's personal existence itself. Neither is it merely a subjective or arbitrary matter, but the responsibility of the self in relation to the world. Man is accountable for his existence and is accountable alone.

In the course of the narrative, K. experiences a growing anxiety about his case arising from the failure of his attempts to master the situation. His trial works on K. as an ever greater distraction so that he is no longer able to concentrate on his business, or be really present to the external world which was his life. Kafka seems to describe a man whose unconscious impulses or anxieties block his conscious drive for success, a man whose life is more and more preoccupied with and distracted by a guilt he cannot face. Guilt, then, becomes the state of being in which the relation of the self to the world is broken, the obstacle which must be overcome before this relation can be resumed. The more guilty one is, the more one is thrown back on oneself; the more one is thrown back on oneself, the more guilty one is likely to feel.

### **Kafka and Kierkegaard – a view of human existence**

In her book *Approaches to Personal Identity*, Leena Eilittä highlights the similarities between Kafka's aesthetics and Kierkegaard's theological views. In his personal remarks throughout his life, Kafka described his thoughts about literature in similar terms to those in which Kierkegaard talked

about religion. Kafka wrote in his diary that his deep devotion to literature makes him find everything else unsatisfying: "My position is unbearable because it contradicts my only desire and purpose which is literature" (quoted in Eilittä 185). In this remark Kafka implies that for him literature was a conscious choice for his life. His statement tells us that his decision to choose literature was as determined and as self-evident as it was for Kierkegaard to look for a religious dimension in his life.

In several later remarks Kafka also mentions the passion that he has for writing and highlights that if he had to stop writing his entire existence would lose its meaning. The passion Kafka felt for writing "led him to renounce the worldly life just like Kierkegaard had done when he devoted himself to religious life" (180), says Eilittä. The inner life which writing allowed Kafka to explore led him repeatedly to neglect everything else in his life, to the extent that everyday life started to lose its value for him. Kafka's remarks show that writing was a conscious choice for him and led him to reject everything else in life. He also recognised the religious implications of literature for him, regarding writing in very similar terms to those in which Kierkegaard regarded religious life. Perhaps Kafka's most revealing remark on this subject is in an aphorism in which Kafka refers to writing "as a form of praying" (quoted in Eilittä 354).

In "Either/ Or", Kierkegaard distinguishes between three different modes of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (485). In the lowest mode of existence, the aesthetic state, the human being lives in the state of "Either/Or" where he explores all the possibilities of life without committing himself to any binding decisions about life. Here the soul is "like a plot of ground in which all sorts of herbs are planted" (486), and the individual is only able to make immediate choices about his life, which are not an expression of his personality but "a mere letting go" (486). Kierkegaard emphasises that "the act of choosing is essentially a proper and stringent expression of the ethical" (486), and a human being who has reached the ethical state consciously wills his own development. As a result, his actions are no longer determined by outer circumstances or passing moments like those of an aesthetic individual, but he understands his life in terms of fulfilling duties. When entering the highest state, the religious state, a human being makes the most significant choice possible, since in the religious state he chooses himself, his true and essential self.

In “Either/Or”, Kierkegaard describes this spiritual development through these stages as the gradual transformation of a person, in which he divides himself into two selves. One of these selves is the typical, imperfect self, a ‘shadow’ which the person eventually rejects during the spiritual journey, and the other is the actual self which remains: “In the morning he casts a shadow in front of him, at noon it goes beside him almost unnoticed, and in the evening it falls behind him” (490).

According to Kierkegaard human existence is in a constant process of becoming, from lower modes of existence towards the higher forms. Kierkegaard stresses the mental energy and passion which a person needs in order to make the choice which eventually leads to authentic existence. He emphasises that in the proper choosing it is less a question of the contents of this choice as “of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses” (490). But Kierkegaard stresses that when making this existential choice, a person not only enters into a new and more profound relationship with himself, but he also enters into a relationship with the transcendence.

In *Either/Or* Kierkegaard describes this moment of choice as a sudden moment of revelation in which a person simultaneously finds his own true personality and is able to relate himself to God:

When around me all has become still, solemn as a starlit night, when the soul is all alone in the world, there appears before it not a distinguished person, but the eternal power itself. It is as though the heavens parted, and the I chooses itself – or, more correctly, it accepts itself. The soul has then seen the highest, which no mortal eye can see and which never can be forgotten. The personality receives the accolade of knighthood which ennobles it for an eternity. He does not become someone other than he was before, he becomes himself, consciousness unites. (491)

Before a person is able to make such a successful choice he has to fulfil two preconditions. The first of these is resignation, which Kierkegaard describes in *Fear and Trembling*. This act of

resignation does not mean a “mere passive surrender to existence but a state in which a person actively renounces temporal things” (178) with a view to eternity. In the state of resignation a person may achieve “peace and rest and comfort in pain”(46), whereby he grows to understand his “eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by virtue of faith”(46). When resigning from the temporal world a person achieves his spiritual validity which eventually leads to the most advanced spiritual state, based on religious faith. Kierkegaard describes this act by drawing a portrayal of “the knight of infinite resignation” (47), a young man who enters a hopeless love affair and must give up his beloved. His desire for the girl, which he cannot actualise in the love relationship, is turned into an inward feeling, and at that moment the man is able to grasp his love in the eternal sense. In this infinite resignation from temporal needs and desires, the man finds peace and comfort in pain since he has been able to reconcile himself with existence. The second prerequisite for choosing oneself is despair. Kierkegaard stresses that the despair which leads to spiritual development concerns the whole personality of a human being in contrast to the aesthetic person who lives in danger of despairing over something particular: “Only a man who despairs over something particular suffers a break, but that is due precisely to the fact that he does not fully despair” (45).

The search for authentic existence in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a development leading towards new subjectivity, one in which a person, through absolute isolation, reaches spiritual ‘inwardness’ in the religious stage. The subjective truth which a human being achieves in this development is in Kierkegaard’s view not communicable and no other human being may assist this development. This inward state is a silent and a hidden state. A religious person possesses a spiritual inwardness which does not find expression in the exterior world:

The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority, an interiority that is not identical, please note, with the first but is a new interiority. (69)

A person who reaches a religious state is therefore led into a solitary state in which he has renounced his finite existence.

## The way of the Law

*The Trial* can be read as highlighting a world that has lost its spirituality, where man has become an abstract being without fervour. The Law sometimes issues warnings to this impoverished humanity, but such calls are never heeded. And so, one Sunday morning when he awakens, a man finds a blade lodged in the back of his neck, the blade of the Law. He pulls it out, and heedless of God, he is reassured and happy when he joins his friends in the familiar world of the Sunday stroll. The divine Law is unknown and the court certainly does not possess the key. Therefore any moral judgement becomes both true and vain, for it is true only because its truth is human and relative. That is why the court which summons Joseph K. is made up of subordinate, corrupt judges. The Supreme Court is inaccessible. When life is not related to an absolute standard, it becomes superfluous, absurd, and sin may be the acceptance of this unjustifiable life since the supreme judges cannot be touched. Religion, born of man's existential anguish, was meant to be the highest manifestation of the human spirit wondering about its destiny. But it has become degraded and obsolete. Only crude subordinate officials, stupid, pretentious bureaucrats remain and block the path that leads to God. One must therefore rediscover this forgotten divinity.

The cathedral is empty, desperately empty and dark. It is no longer a place for meditation; it is an historical monument which Joseph K. visits. The priest does not preach from the main pulpit but is satisfied with the small pulpit and chooses for his sermon a most unusual hour when the building is not profaned by a crowd who pay only lip service to faith.

In the pulpit and at the altar:

There was no longer a Moses or Aaron.  
The divine service was carried on  
Like any other thing  
Which, following the course of the world  
Is dry and withered with age. (67)

The novel seems to rebel against the religion that constitutes an obstacle to K.'s subjectivity. His uniqueness demands a break with religion and also requires solitude. The unique being as such

requires solitude. But Kafka's personality is not that simple, for he is nothing of the Promethean superman. Nietzsche, who murdered God, held up to man a new ideal, the superman who replaced God; the eternal return replaced eternal happiness. Kafka took only human weakness – for, according to one of Kafka's aphorisms, we not only "sinned when we ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but also because we have not yet eaten of the fruit of the tree of life" (*The Diary of Kafka* 23). He seems both to deny and to affirm, not daring to make a choice; he lives in anguish.

Up to his thirtieth year, Joseph K. was a man like other men. He led the life of an automaton and found peace and security in the world of daily routine and work. He would stay at the office until nine; then he would take a little walk, alone or with colleagues, and round out the evening at the café, where he stayed until eleven, usually at a reserved table in the company of older men. There were exceptions to this regime: the Manager of the Bank who thought highly of his work occasionally invited him to take an automobile ride or to take dinner at his villa. Once a week K. visited a young lady named Elsa who was night waitress at a café and, during the day, entertained her visitors from her bed. One cannot imagine a more impersonal, anonymous existence. His name, reduced to a simple initial, is symbolic from the outset. Joseph K.'s life is a superficial one, like the lives of all those who, in an attempt to escape the anguish of original dereliction, take refuge in an arbitrary system of the world. They organise raw existence, laden with peril, and transform it into an intelligible, reassuring world. But this involves a construction of the intellect which eliminates the mystery of the world and interprets everything from the practical point of view. Of course, in exchange, such men lead a calm existence; but they buy that tranquillity at the price of what is deepest in them, since they base their interpretation of themselves only on things. As Hubben says, "Everything that compromises the security of the average man is relegated to the subconscious and he lives inauthentically" (143). In the end he no longer knows his own soul and thinks that it is that thin solidified crust under which a world of deep chaotic tendencies slumbers. He becomes incapable of fulfilling his own possibilities. Hubben explains:

Obsessed by the material world he wishes to master, concerned only with the practical problems, he no longer sees the totality of his soul and interprets himself only in the light of categories he has created to make his environment subserve his needs. (145)

He is, then, only a thing among things, and because of the one-sided development of his intellect, his true being becomes strange to him. Only the impersonal 'they' subsists.

But sometimes, as in the case of the hero of *The Trial*, it happens that the reign of the 'they' is upset. Joseph K.'s arrest is a call issued from another region of being. It is a question that has surged up from the depths of the chaos existing in man, overflowing and concealed by preoccupation. Joseph K. has fled his destiny, the responsibility he had not had the strength to shoulder. His deepest self, which is truer to him than he is to himself, reveals itself in the form of fear and trembling. If Franz and Willem proceed to arrest Joseph K. in Fräulein Bürnster's room, and not his own, it is not a chance occurrence. Joseph K. is "being torn from his world and transplanted into a world which, in its terrifying strangeness, is his own" (Friedman 287). Joseph K. had lived in bad faith: obliged to choose between two existential possibilities, he had chosen inauthentic existence and betrayed what was deepest and most personal in him for the benefit of a superficial and reassuring way of life.

He is guilty because he had not taken his total 'self' into account. He therefore cannot be arrested in his own room which is part of his environmental world. He is arrested in Fräulein Bürnster's room, for it represents a world foreign to K., and yet close to him: it is the dark, unconscious part of himself. Joseph K. had, in effect, consented to living a life of an automaton and suddenly, in anguish, personified by Franz and Willem (the men who arrest him), he becomes aware of this split in his being which, up to that point, had been frozen in the familiar world of everyday interpretations. Joseph K. is guilty towards this deepest and original self and as a result anxiety invades his life. His happy indifference is compromised by the sudden eruption of dark powers which summon him to their Court.

The workmen's quarter which on Sunday is swarming with disorderly primitive life, Fräulein Bürnster, the girl who is so near and yet so remote, the sheriff's wife, the nurse Leni, all these figures simply represent the repressed forces that constitute a constant threat to everyday life, but they also represent the promise of a higher, regenerated and sincerer life than the spiritless one led by Joseph K. K. remains a stranger to this world of being and assumes a deep guilt with regard to it. He does not understand the warning that was issued to him. His servitude to the world of

inauthenticity is too powerful for him to be able to free himself and understand, as Leni tells him, that “all accused men are handsome” (19), since their fate is of the elect. He protests that Franz and Willem have eaten his bread and butter, his honey, and have stolen his linen, on the pretext that they would hold it in trust. But that was perhaps an invitation to turn away from the human world of preoccupation and focus his attention on a world of real values, rooted in the most authentic aspects of himself. It is at the price of such surrender that he might escape from a banal life. But he does not wish to escape from the hold of this average world; he clings to it and makes use of all human means to regain the sweet calm that had deserted him.

He accepts the suggestions of his uncle who, as a man of action, sees in Joseph K.'s arrest “a threat to the entire family since it holds the unauthentic life up to doubt” (Swander 153). He then seeks out a lawyer, a symbol of rigid human intelligence, one who is content with describing and remaining in the domain of the finite and foreseeable. He describes without even questioning Joseph K., and moves in the sphere of the finite without ever being able to suggest a solution for the problem of human destiny. Intellect is powerless; it cannot put an end to the trial which is a strictly personal affair and can be won by the accused only. K. grows tired of his lawyer. Since human reason cannot in any way help him, he will seek out the artist. Perhaps human art will bring back to him the peace he wants at any price. The solution suggested is of little consolation. The painter lives in appearance and cannot obtain any definite acquittal. Only “apparent acquittal” and “unlimited delay” (36) exist for him. The solution is therefore only temporary and the painter lives in the world of illusions. He does not live in the world of being, but the world of appearances. Thus Joseph K. cannot turn to anyone. He is always brought back to himself, for salvation resides only in him.

We see the unfortunate Joseph K. oscillating between two worlds: He comes back to the Court although he has not been summoned because, like Frau Grubach, he has the feeling that his happiness is somehow involved. Yet he still turns his back on the solitary life and seeks in the community a remedy for his anxiety, but the human community rejects him. Frau Grubach, as well as the two inspectors, refuse to shake his hand. He is at home neither in unauthentic society nor in the world of the Court that is located in attics and sits only at night and on Sundays in dehumanised areas.

Joseph K. lives on the border of two worlds and in his confusion finds no solace. Only now can one understand the numerous reasons why Joseph K. is sentenced to death. He must die because he does not seek out the Law. He finds it by chance, in the cathedral, but does not understand the deep causes of his anguish. No matter what direction Joseph K. takes, he finds himself in a dead-end, and there is no way out for him other than death. As Swander says, he is “such a model of a utilitarian world that he rebels against the world of authentic being and in his struggle has recourse to all operations of an all-too-human logic” (151).

Joseph K. follows set paths only superficially. In truth, he lives on the periphery of society, misunderstood, unhappy over his absurd work at the bank, while he feels vaguely within him an infinitely rich and complex world that causes him anguish. The individual who stands apart from the rest therefore feels guilty over his apartness. Furthermore, his guilt feeling is aggravated when he wishes to reveal his singularity, for he must affirm it against the established order. To have an awareness of the self, to be oneself and to give up the impersonal life which men lead, seems to be the ethical thrust of the novel. Joseph K. dies because he is protected neither from on high nor from behind, neither by God nor by an existence established on the deep foundations of the authentic being. His life is therefore no longer based on the absolute. Faith is dead; men have killed it. Man is nothing more than a wreck. He must find his reason for being in himself, at the very core of his existence, which intellect has reduced to the condition of an abstract category. He must rediscover the meaning of life.

Between 1917 and 1919, a few years before his death, Kafka jotted down over a hundred aphorisms. He evidently attached more importance to them than to his other work, for he went to the unusual pains of copying them out on separate slips of paper and numbering them. They are not only remarkable in themselves, but throw a great deal of light on *The Trial*. A particularly insightful piece is his comment on the law of the world and our confusion in it:

He is thirsty, and cut off from a spring by a mere clump of trees. But he is divided against himself: one part overlooks the whole, sees that he is standing here and that the spring is just beside him; but another part notices nothing, has at most a

divination that the first part sees all. But as he notices nothing he cannot drink.  
(*Diaries 1914-1923* 235)

Kafka adopted from Kierkegaard a belief in the inconsistency between divine and human law. As Kierkegaard puts it: "Man is incapable of apprehending the divine law, and it is impossible for the divine law even to appear in immoral eyes" (*Fear and Trembling* 190). Kierkegaard founded his argument on the sacrifice demanded by God from Abraham which, according to human standards, was arbitrary and unjust. On the other hand, it is man's duty to "direct his life in accordance with this law whose workings he cannot understand" (Eilittä 180), even if all aid from Heaven should be denied him. When called to sacrifice his son, Abraham voluntarily gives up his ethical life, his duties as husband and father, and undertakes in solitary silence a voyage to the mountain of Moriah where he is to sacrifice his little son. God's command does not express any general or universal requirement, but is God's private demand upon Abraham. His spiritual development is possible only after he has succeeded in breaking the ethical norms which have so far ruled his life.

### **Kafka's Justice**

There is no more poignant piece in the novel than when the priest encounters K. in the church and proceeds to tell him the story of the man and the doorkeeper:

In front of the law there is a doorkeeper. A man from the countryside comes up to the door and asks for entry. But the doorkeeper says he can't let him in to the law right now...[T]he man from the country had not expected difficulties like this, the law was supposed to be accessible for anyone at any time, he thinks, but now he looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, sees his big hooked nose, his long thin tartar-beard, and he decides it's better to wait until he has permission to enter.

Over many years, the man watches the doorkeeper almost without a break...[F]inally his eyes grow dim. Just before he dies, he brings together all his experience from all this time into one question which he has still never put to the

doorkeeper. He beckons to him, the doorkeeper has to bend over deeply as the difference in their sizes has changed very much to the disadvantage of the man. "What is it you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper, "You're insatiable." "Everyone wants access to the law," says the man, "how come, over all these years, no-one but me has asked to be let in?" The doorkeeper can see the man's come to his end, his hearing has faded, and so, so that he can be heard, he shouts to him: "Nobody else could have got in this way, as this entrance was meant only for you. Now I'll go and close it'." (235)

If we take seriously the proposition that Kafka is not talking exclusively about one or another aspect of reality – the psychological, the social, the religious – we come upon the illuminating discovery that he has found a way of dealing with justice and guilt at the meeting point of all of these spheres. The intermixture of psychological, social, and ontological reality is basic, in fact, to Kafka's understanding of the problem of justice, whether in the family, in society, or in the relation of man to the world or to God. Kafka's own experience undoubtedly gave him a keen awareness of justice, and at the same time a realisation, as Hubben says, of an "arbitrary element in human destiny and social relations, an irreducible absurd that makes much talk of family, social, or religious justice a pretence or an illusion" (140). Even where justice exists and is effective, it is often merely a superficial readjustment alongside the fundamental and irreducible injustice of each man's unique situation – the 'given' of his physical and mental capacities and his position in one family or social group or another, the ostracism of the one who does not 'fit in', the domination of the less forceful by the more forceful. The very meaning of justice changes, in this context from the justice based upon the fundamental similarity of one man to another to the personal "justice" which is the lot of each man individually.

Kafka's main theme, then, is an ever-present sense of guilt, perhaps sin, and this guilt is being revenged on those who are unable to recognise their moral burden. The fact that the protagonist in this story does not know of his guilt makes it an interesting psychoanalytical experience. The true object of any analysis is not the recovery of earlier and disturbing traumas but the recall of the lost memory of them. The crux of the problem is this passive transcendence of the mind into a seemingly unrecoverable past: we have forgotten that we have forgotten. This double absence of

memory reminds one of Kierkegaard's remark that he "who lives ethically has memory of life, whereas he who lives aesthetically has not" (*Fear and Trembling* 189). The protagonist is surrounded by others who seem neutral, although not always indifferent; but they never reduce his sense of solitude.

*The Trial* seems to be concerned, then, with what happens when the world breaks in on the self as it does on K. Although the world that confronts the self is absurd, it places a real demand on the self that the latter must meet. The self can find meaning in its existence neither through rationalising away the absurdity of the world nor through rejecting the world's demand because of this absurdity, but through answering with its existence the demand that comes to it through the absurd and that can reach it in no other way. The choice then is not between the self and the world; the self becomes itself in the meeting with the world. One should not retreat into oneself in order to avoid suffering, but bear suffering as an inescapable part of one's meeting with the world. This does not mean that the key to real existence lies in sociality. On the contrary, it is necessary for the self to know how to stand alone in meeting the demand of the world that is placed on it. One must stand one's ground and not be drawn off into distracting relationships. But not in the manner of Joseph K., whose concern for self-protection leaves him without a real self. It is a calling to account in the sense that it makes us accountable for our lives. We are accountable for our existence in a way that eludes our rational grasp of guilt and innocence. We are guilty for not answering, or answering in the wrong way the call that we could never clearly hear.

Kafka was a strange personality who from childhood on, says Friedman, "struggled with the difficulty of being; for he wanted to live in an authentic fashion" (375). But he could not express this strangeness. Language is important because it is general. It is a tool created by the impersonal 'we' and can only translate the forms of being which are of the least common denominator. But the regions explored by Kafka are "regions in which silence reigns" (*Diaries* 236). He could therefore use language only allusively. This he notes in his *Diaries* on 12 January 1911:

I haven't written down a great deal about myself these days, partly because of laziness (I now sleep so much and so soundly during the day, I have greater weight while I sleep), but also partly because of the fear of betraying my self-

perception. This fear is justified, for one should permit a self-perception to be established definitely in writing only when it can be done with the greatest completeness, with all the incidental consequences, as well as with entire truthfulness. For if this does not happen and in any event I am not capable of it – then what is written down will, in accordance with its own purpose and with the superior power of the established, replace what has been felt only vaguely in such a way that the real feeling will disappear while the worthlessness of what has been noted down will be recognised too late. (234)

Therefore, for Kafka, it seems there is an inconsistency between the specific and the general, and in the passage from the diary just quoted, we recognise the insurmountable difficulties Joseph K. came up against once he decided to write his stories. The strange individual is unhappy, for his uniqueness cannot be communicated. He must struggle against a society which seeks, by every means at its disposal, to wipe out the particularity of the man who wishes to live faithful to himself. “In school and at home they tried to erase individuality” (*Diaries*, 162), said Kafka, and this criticism is aimed at society in general.

If his particular individuality was condemned, how much more serious must have been the particularities he concealed and in which he himself recognised some small injustice. This fault was not only directed at him by others; he also inflicted it on himself for having been derelict in his duty. When he hid one of his particularities, he considered himself damned. Hubben claims that “as he grew older, his strangeness increased along with the number of his secrets” (151), and because of his acute awareness, he knew that everything could not be confessed. Thus with an increase of awareness and the passage of time, the feeling of guilt grew in Kafka, and perhaps by extension, in Joseph K. There was no use in Kafka’s confessing; he was so unique that his secret was thrown back at him by society in general, for among the living, he says, nobody can be free of himself (quoted in Hubben 152). There is no escape. He must live with his secrets, for the confession that liberates is impossible. The odd individual is therefore guilty and Joseph K.’s crime is in part rooted in his oddity. Society can do nothing with people who will not fit into one of its categories. All the individual can do is transform his/her isolation and suffering into creativity. Out of his oddness, Kafka created a remarkable work of literature.

## Chapter 4

### Albert Camus - The Stranger

#### Introduction

I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body...And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

(*The Stranger* 1942)

Camus provides a concrete example in *The Stranger* of an individual with a particular consciousness, a particular eruption of freedom and creativity into the world. We distinguish ourselves from the world as it is for each one of us. Each of us is the centre of meaning for his world. *The Stranger* highlights the fact that freedom is a constant unveiling of Being. Our creativity consists in the fact that each of us does this in his own way.

*The Stranger* was published in 1942 and is the novel which brought Camus fame. It is also the novel which is taken most often as the illustration of the philosophy of the *absurd* which Camus sets forth in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For Camus, life has no rational meaning or order. People have trouble dealing with this notion and continually struggle to establish logical structure and meaning in their lives. *The Stranger* is a summons to reflection, an invitation to its readers to consider their own mortality and the meaning of their existence. Despite Camus' intricate argument concerning the logic of the absurd, one does not have to be a philosopher in order to confront the absurd.

The fictional hero who comes closest to fitting Camus' description of the absurd man is the central character of *The Stranger*, Meursault, an unassuming office worker in Algiers, not overly given to reflection. This hero, or anti-hero, has a glaring fault in the eyes of society – he seems to lack the basic emotions and reactions that are required of him. He observes the facts of life, death and sex from the outside. We are given no reason why he chooses to marry Marie or gun down an Arab.

Even when he is involved in a personal tragedy which results in a frightening and unjust trial, he considers his own feelings and the actions of others with a calm and almost ironic truthfulness. For this reason, he is a stranger, detached and involved. It is worth noting here that *L'Étranger* is sometimes translated as *The Outsider*, but this is inaccurate. The novel seems to suggest that Camus does not want us to think of Meursault as the stranger who lives “outside” of his society, but of a man who is the stranger within his society.

In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus provides an original tale of one of Greece’s most spectacular and unfortunate criminals. During his life, Sisyphus defied the gods, and for a time deceived death itself. As a result he was sentenced to heaving a boulder up a mountain, a rock which inevitably tumbled down just before Sisyphus reached the summit. Camus’ analysis is not a fiction but a philosophical essay which serves as a commentary for Camus’ novel *The Stranger*. For Camus, Sisyphus is a symbol of absurdity, a concept closely identified with Camus. *The absurd* refers to the discrepancy between man’s aspirations and his possibilities, and to the lack of any ultimate, external justification of man and his projects. Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He becomes so as much through his passions as through his torment. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life result in an unspeakable punishment in which, as Keefe puts it, “all one’s being is spent in accomplishing nothing” (23). This is the price which must be paid for the passions of this earth. Still, for Camus, Sisyphus represents also the dignity of man. As Sisyphus decides each time to try again to roll the rock up the hill, he gives of his own free will a meaning to what he is doing. *The Myth of Sisyphus* sheds light on man’s dilemma. Like Sisyphus who rolls his stone up the hill and is never able to reach the top, man simply cannot cease to be free, however many attempts he makes to be rid of his freedom. It is the nature of freedom to look ahead. What is not yet, but aims at being, is called value, and this is what freedom pursues. It imagines that the attainment of the value in question would bring satisfaction. Having reached its goal, freedom could rest. But this is impossible, for to be satisfied would mean one would shift into the condition of a thing and cease to be a developing, improvising freedom. Freedom can only live and grow at the price of constant frustration.

## Brief overview

With the exception of the ending of *The Stranger*, Meursault, is anything but a philosopher. He lacks a certain awareness. The sequence of events is simple. His father deserted his mother when he was small. His mother, whom he has sent to an old age home, dies, and he attends the funeral. He is unable to show any emotion or cry either while he sits beside the body all night or at the funeral itself. And yet he is overcome by the sun and almost faints. The next day he meets a girl named Maria at a swimming pool. He takes her as his mistress the same night. When Maria asks him if he will marry her, he replies, perhaps. When she asks him if he loves her, he says, no. He makes friends with Raymond, a pimp who lives in his building, but with the same indifference as he exhibits towards Maria. He sees no reason not to be Raymond's friend, and later he sees no reason not to assist when Raymond asks him to come to the police station with him to defend Raymond against the charge that he has beaten up his Arab girlfriend. When Meursault and Maria go to the beach with Raymond, his girlfriend and another couple, the Arab brothers of this girl show up and attack Raymond with a knife. Meursault takes away Raymond's revolver so he won't shoot the Arabs, and later himself goes for a walk on the beach. He sees one of the Arabs sitting by a rock in the shadow with a knife glinting in the sun, and now he re-enacts what he had earlier thought when Raymond handed him the gun, namely, "that one might fire, or not fire – and it would come to absolutely the same thing" (62). Although he knows he could turn around at any time, he keeps walking toward the rock and, when he gets near, kills the Arab with Raymond's revolver.

Even upon superficial reading it is evident that Meursault is not being tried for having murdered the Arab. Had that been the case, a plea of self-defence would have resulted in a few years imprisonment at the most. What the prosecuting attorney dwells upon is not the details of the murder but Meursault's apparent indifference at his mother's funeral and the callousness of a man who could begin a love affair on the very next day. When Meursault's own lawyer asks whether his client is on trial for having killed a man or for having buried his mother, the prosecutor replies that the relation between the two facts is "profound, moving and essential... when he buried his mother, this man showed he had a criminal's heart" (99).

The novel is divided into two parts, creating a division between the time of 'harmony' in Meursault's life, a very simple life, in which he appears to judge the world around him, displaying a stance of reserve and disinterest, and the second part of the novel, when he himself becomes the person who is judged, and where society attempts to manufacture meaning behind Meursault's actions. The trial is absurd in that the judge, prosecutors, lawyers and jury try to find meaning where none is to be found. This in turn poses the question as to whether life has any meaning or redeeming purpose. Even during the funeral procession of his mother, Meursault is more interested in his surroundings and the immediate physical experience than in acting like a grieving son. His personality is seen as a threat to society due to its seeming irrationality. We see this in his mental descriptions of the natural world, where he may go into minute detail about the physicality of things around him, and yet his perception of social or emotional views and nuances is rudimentary and simplistic. This indicates a perceptive ability that does not go beyond the tangible. Meursault only observes at face value, and does not try to find any kind of purpose in what he views or what he feels. Neither the external world in which Meursault lives, nor the internal world of his attitudes and thoughts, have any kind of rational order. So while society attempts to recreate the steps of a murderer using logic and reasoning and rationale, Meursault becomes a prime example of Camus' absurd situation.

### **On the brink of freedom**

Camus' first sources of life were, as he stated repeatedly, sun, sea, sky, light, the pleasures of the body. To be separated from these forces of nature always remained for Camus a terrible exile. Although he lived his childhood and youth in a poverty which, as he said, taught him that "not everything is beautiful under the sun and in history, the sun itself taught me that history is not everything" (quoted in Kirk 97). This focus on observation and physicality comes across distinctly in the novel. In *The Stranger* there is a pattern of watching or observation. The novel concerns itself with our endless search for meaning, we are all looking for purpose in our lives. The characters of *The Stranger* all watch each other and the world around them. Meursault is detached from his emotions, which makes it possible for him to be an observer of his own life, watching it as a 'stranger'. Meursault watches the world go by from his balcony. He later passively watches his own trial. The world around Meursault is a fascination. He keenly observes the sun, the heat, the physical

geography of his surroundings. Antagonism is present behind the eyes of the Arabs as they watch Meursault and his friends, the eyes of the jury and witnesses at his trial, the ever-present, gaze of the crowd, the eyes of society.

Why does Meursault commit this senseless murder? Not, certainly, because he is a friend, as the jury later suggests on the basis of the fact that he did not weep at his mother's funeral. Nor was he looking for trouble when he went out. His original motive in walking to the shade of the rock is the opposite: "Anything to be rid of the glare, the sight of women in tears, the strain and effort – and to retrieve the pool of shadow by the rock and its cool silence!" (63). The heat itself and the glare of the sun become the chief clue as to why he goes forward knowingly to do something he has no wish to do: "It struck me that all I had to do was to turn, walk away, and think no more about it. But the whole beach, pulsing with heat, was pressing on my back" (63). The heat becomes for him an unbearable pressure that leads him to shoot the Arab as a gesture of desperate revolt, a breaking of the unbearable tension:

I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly, of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. (63)

This breakthrough is something more than a solar distress. The key to this reaction is provided by Meursault's statement: "It was just the same sort of heat as at my mother's funeral, and I had the disagreeable sensations – especially in my forehead, where all the veins seemed to be bursting through the skin. I couldn't stand it any longer" (63). What has happened here is nothing other than Meursault's mourning for his mother. That he did not weep at her funeral was not because of hard heartedness, but because he identifies himself with her. Like her, he expects nothing of the world; this lack of expectation is the clue to his seeming indifference to life. It is not that he wants nothing, but that – aside from a few immediate physical sensations – he hopes for nothing. He is a man who has schooled himself never to demand anything of life, never to expect anything of it. Therefore, he

thinks it a matter of no importance whether he marries Maria or whether he perjures himself for Raymond. The one time he thinks of marrying Maria is when she is most like his mother as he knew her, gossiping with other women. But it is also to escape the women's 'talk' which he finds so oppressive that he leaves the cabin. He identifies with his mother, but he does not really want her in the form of marriage to Maria. He expects nothing out of marriage either.

But why, we must ask, does a man who is so indifferent to matters that closely concern him give way to an outburst of violence in a matter that does not concern him at all? He explains it as shaking off his sweat and the clinging veil of light, but he also knows that the relief he finds is one that destroys him:

I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body...And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing. (64)

What is this but the involuntary protest of the self which has been pressured in on itself so far that it has no choice but to explode? Like the rebel whom Camus describes in the book of that title, "he confronts an order of things which oppresses him with the insistence on a kind of right not to be oppressed beyond the limit that he can tolerate" (212). Only there is nothing conscious or aware about Meursault's protest.

This same protest is the clue to the one other explosion which Meursault experiences, when the prison chaplain forces his way in on him and tries to bring him to confess before he is executed. Meursault has by no means been indifferent to the certainty of the guillotine. But he has schooled himself with considerable effort to a precarious balance, which the priest now upsets. When the priest asks to be called 'Father' and insists that he is on Meursault's side and will pray for him even though his heart is hardened, something in Meursault explodes, and he starts yelling insults at the top of his voice. It is at this point that we discover the deepest ground of the indifference and hopelessness that he shares with his mother, his constant awareness that he will die and that he will die alone. This he tells the priest, challenging the latter's ordered universe with the vision of the absurd. He has a certainty that the priest has not, the fact of his present life and of the death

that is coming. This certainty makes it a matter of indifference whether he had done x or y, whether he had lived 'authentically' or 'inauthentically', for "nothing, nothing had the least importance" (118). In the face of the absurd, there can be no image of man, no image of a meaningful direction of personal existence. A slow, persistent breeze had been blowing toward him from the years that were to come. This breeze – the awareness of this future death – "had levelled out all the ideas that people tried to foist on [him] in the equally unreal years he was living through" (118). He says:

What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother's love, or his God; or the way a man decides to live, the fate one thinks one chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to choose not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people who, like him, called themselves my brothers....All alike would be condemned to die one day...And what difference could it make if, after being charged with murder, he were executed because he did not weep at his mother's funeral, since it all came to the same thing in the end? (119)

But in the end of *The Stranger*, Meursault achieves a transformation and even a sort of happiness. His anger at the priest has washed him clean and emptied him of hope. Now he is able to understand why his mother took a fiancé at the end of her life. "With death so near, Mother must have felt like someone on the brink of freedom, ready to start life all over again. No one, no one in the world had any right to weep for her. And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again" (120).

His identification with his mother now takes on a positive aspect. He lays his heart open for the very first time "to the indifference of the universe" (120). He finds indifference a welcome relief from even worse that he has expected, and he feels a partnership with the inhuman absurd that comforts him. "To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realise that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still" (120). This new feeling even gives him a fragile bond to the society that has rejected him. The original exile of his indifference has been reinforced and doubled by the attitude of the jury. Threatened by the fact that Meursault's murder of the Arab was completely unmotivated and absurd, they converted him into a fiend. By doing so, they only widened the gap that separates Meursault from the society that judges and executes him. Now, however, Meursault feels that, just because he expects nothing of his fellowman, he will be less lonely if, on the day of

his execution, there should be a huge crowd of spectators who would greet him with “howls of execration” (120). This would be at least a minimal contact.

### **A disconcerting truth**

Camus therefore provides an explanation which gives greater stature to Meursault and which may enable us to see how he fits the requirements of the absurd hero. Evidently Camus intended to portray in Meursault not a poor individual who irritated society but a man who seriously threatens it, seeing, as Keefe explains, “the determination of his own life as a prerequisite” (37). He is condemned because he will not play the game. But in what way does he refuse to play the game? The answer is simple: he refuses to lie. Lying is not only saying what is not, it is also saying more than is, and in matters of the human heart, more than we feel. We all do this every day, in order to simplify life. Meursault, contrary to appearances, does not want to simplify life. He tells the truth, he refuses to exaggerate his feelings, and immediately society feels itself threatened. For instance, he is asked to say that he is sorry for his crime, according to the conventional formula. He answers that he experiences more annoyance on its account than genuine sorrow. And this statement condemns him.

Seen in this light Meursault is a man willing to die for the truth. This disconcerting honesty is portrayed in Meursault’s relations with people close to him. Toward his mother, his conduct had been sensibly dutiful but never sentimental. Although the prosecuting attorney tried to attack the reputation of a man who would put his mother in a public institution, the director of the Home pointed out that Meursault was not in a position to look after her himself and that she was much happier in the Home. It was the realisation that now it would actually be a wrench to her to leave there which had kept Meursault from visiting her often – this in addition to the fact that it would have meant going to considerable inconvenience and giving up his Sundays. It is apparent that Meursault by a kind of quantifiable calculation balanced the pleasure bestowed by his visits against the discomfort involved and decided it was not worth it to make the trip frequently. The same sort of matter-of-fact assessment appears in his conduct after his mother’s death. Sitting beside her body, he wonders whether his smoking would imply any disrespect to her and decides that it could not possibly make any difference.

Meursault simply acts by his immediate impulse. Since he is not hungry, he refuses the suggestion that he go out for dinner, but he accepts a *café au lait*. He admits that he does not know just how old his mother is. He says that he does not wish to look at her (a refusal he does not try to explain even to himself). Throughout he refrains from (or more accurately never even thinks of) conventional expressions of sorrow. During the following week Meursault's conduct is not perceptibly different from what it was before the funeral. Since his mother had not been a part of his daily life, why should her death change anything? "It occurred to me that somehow I'd got through another Sunday, that Mother now was buried, and tomorrow I'd be going back to work as usual" (32). On the other hand, alone in the evening, he finds himself "for some reason thinking of Mother" (40). And on many occasions he recalls something which she had said and evaluates a situation from her point of view. Even though they "had not talked with each other very much" (110), apparently there had been a degree of comfortable harmony.

Did Meursault love his mother? Or more particularly, did he grieve at her funeral? When Meursault's lawyer puts the question to him he finds it difficult to answer because he is not accustomed to reflect upon his emotions. Nevertheless, he tries to reconstruct his past feelings and says first that he had certainly been very fond of his mother but that he realises this does not mean much since "all healthy people had more or less wished for the death of those they loved" (104). Disturbed by the lawyer's agitated response, Meursault goes on to explain that his reactions are always in large part determined by his physical state and that on the day of the funeral he had been numb with fatigue and lack of sleep. Yet he concludes very seriously that he would have preferred it if his mother had not died. Needless to say, it is not only Meursault's lawyer who would be disconcerted and shocked by such a statement, but this is not the issue. Camus is not arguing that it is desirable for human beings to be so close to indifference, but that in a world where this is the truth about most human relationships, Meursault is ahead of those who pretend that things are other than they are.

Camus is subtle and skillful in showing how society echoes Meursault's conduct even while it hides the fact from itself. For example, he is condemned for showing no signs of violent grief. But it seems "entirely natural to the warden that the close associates of Meursault's mother should be

kept apart from the coffin so that they may not be upset by the sight of it" (Keefe 38). The reason implied is that knowledge of their own death in the probably close future would be too painful. But there is also the suggestion that if the coffin is not there to remind them, the fact of their friend's death will not be greatly disturbing. At the time of the funeral Meursault is made to feel embarrassed because he does not know his mother's age, and the admission is used against him at the trial. But when, in response to his employer's question, Meursault replies, "she was about sixty" (33), the employer looks relieved, and feels that the whole matter was closed. It is obvious that he does not care whether a person somewhat advanced in age dies at one time or another.

At the trial a witness from the Home, who says that Meursault's mother sometimes complained of his neglect, adds that it was the usual thing for inmates to complain about their relatives. All these events indicate Meursault's having brought to light a truth about human indifference and self-preoccupation which society does not want revealed, and which it generally covers up with sentimental clichés about undying motherly love, devotion until the grave, a 'natural' love for our fellow human beings. "What difference could they make to me, the death of others, or mother's love, or the way one decides to live" (118), says Meursault that the people witnessing the trial dimly comprehended that Meursault was being sacrificed to protect them from the truth about themselves is indicated by the attitude of those listening when the death sentence is pronounced: the "young journalist kept his eyes averted" (106). Meursault looked at the faces of the crowd and "could interpret the look on the faces of those present; it was one of almost respectful sympathy. The policemen too, handled me very gently" (107).

### **Living in the present**

Meursault's attitude toward Marie is also illuminating. As one might expect, he never analyses the appeal she has for him so as to classify him as sensual, spiritual, or a proportioned mixture of the two. He simply desires Marie, and desire is stimulated and delighted by her body, her appearance in the red and white dress, her individual gestures and facial expressions. At their second meeting there occurs the conversation: "[W]hen she laughed, I wanted her again. A moment later, she asked me if I loved her. I replied that the question really didn't mean anything but I probably didn't" (42). Yet a little later he tells her that he is perfectly willing to marry her if she wishes; and still later,

after watching her fitting in gracefully with Raymond's friends and helping with the party lunch, he considers very seriously the desirability of their getting married: "For the first time, perhaps, I seriously considered the possibility of marrying her" (55). In prison, after the murder, it is memories of Marie which comfort, and separation from Marie which most torments him. It is "when he learns that she will no longer be allowed to visit him that he first grasps the full reality of his being in prison" (Keefe 76), and feels that his life has been brought to a dead end. At the close it is the image of Marie's face, "golden like the sun and alight with the flame of desire" (108), which personifies for him the life he so desperately hates to leave.

It is Meursault's habit to live a series of presents. Faithful to his actual being and feeling, he is accustomed, by inclination rather than philosophical conviction, to live as fully as possible all that the immediate moment offers. It is usual for common sense to despise the man who lives primarily in the present. He is likely to get into difficulties, and he is generally considered selfish. But Camus makes us see such a person in a new light.

Although he is bored and finds it difficult to listen to people who mouth conventional observations which they themselves do not understand, he is wholly absorbed in anyone with whom he is in real contact. Throughout the novel we find him using the word 'interesting'. He gets involved with Raymond because he finds him interesting. Although rumour has it that Raymond is a pimp, this does not matter to Meursault since that aspect is totally outside his relation with Raymond. Again, Meursault is interested in the eccentric habits of his neighbour Salamano, a man who evidently transferred to an ugly dog his earlier habit of mistreating his wife, but whose death made his existence seem utterly empty. On one occasion Meursault spends time following an elderly woman who had piqued his curiosity by her odd behaviour at his restaurant. At the trial he forgets his anxiety about the verdict in his interest in how both attorneys are conducting his case. When this interest is directed toward others, it means that he makes himself wholly 'available' to them. And if the result is that they expect from him some sort of commitment, he is willing to put himself at their disposal. He is ready to marry Marie. He consents to help Raymond in his intrigue. While he cannot see why Raymond wants to pin down their relation by a verbal declaration that they are 'pals', he offers no objection and even goes so far as to support Raymond's statement to this effect at the trial.

In short, his relation to other people turns out not to be real indifference after all. Meursault does not seek in Marie either a means of guaranteeing his own subjectivity or a way of evading self-responsibility. He does not use her in order to attain happiness. He is happy to be with her because she is as she is. In prison, even as he wishes that he might be with her, he reflects that it would be only natural and proper that she should forget him and take someone else as a lover: “what did it matter if at this very moment Marie was kissing a new boyfriend?” (119). We can understand why Marie should feel that she perhaps loved Meursault for his ‘queerness’ but that she might eventually come to hate him for it. The distinctive quality of Meursault’s attachment to Marie is that it is based on an absolute respect both for her and for himself as free individuals. As such it allows a measure of selflessness. For while he makes no pretensions of living only in and for her, he feels that her freedom to live contentedly in the future is far more important than any duty of loyalty owed to him.

In pleading for the death sentence for Meursault, the prosecuting attorney tries to show that his criminal conduct at his mother’s funeral and his murder of the Arab were crucially connected. While the lawyer’s reasons are wrong, his conclusions are right – as Camus has carefully shown. Meursault had tried to explain to his own lawyer that at the time of the funeral he had been confused by fatigue and by the heat that he was only half aware of what was going on. Much later, when he is asked why he killed the Arab, he can only reply, “because of the sun” (95). In his first account of the event, Meursault says:

The sun was burning up my cheeks, and I felt drops of sweat collect on my eyebrows. It was the same sun as on the day when I buried my mother and – like then-my forehead especially was paining me, all my veins pounding together against my skin. I couldn’t stand that burning any more, and so I took a step forward. (64)

As it turns out he quite literally kills the Arab because of the sun. Meursault had no personal hatred for him and considered the incident closed when Raymond was wounded. It was quite by chance that he still had the revolver. Although he had grasped it as a precaution when he saw the Arab

draw a knife, there was a moment when he realised that he might safely withdraw without action. But the pounding in his head, the glare of the sun, which brought tears to his eyes at the instant when the accumulated sweat rolled from his eyebrows and filmed his vision, combined with a sudden blinding flash of light which leapt from the moving blade of the Arab's knife to sear Meursault's eyeballs in an outburst of pain, caused everything to reel before him. With his whole being strained to the utmost, Meursault felt that the sky was raining fire down upon him. His grip on the revolver tightened, the trigger gave way and abruptly shattered the peace of the sun-drenched beach and the calm balance of Meursault's existence.

Naturally the jury cannot accept Meursault's explanation. They much prefer the prosecutor's theoretical reconstruction of events:

The prosecutor was now considering what he called my 'soul'. He said he'd studied it closely – and had found a blank...he said I had no soul, there was nothing human about me, not one of those moral qualities which normal men possess had any place in my mentality. (101)

It is easy to believe that a man who apparently lacks the normal emotions and sense of decency would deliberately carry out a premeditated murder – even if the motive by itself appears weak and unconvincing. But to believe that a man might commit a murder without being a criminal is both difficult and dangerous. In one way, since his act was non-reflective, since he had all to lose and nothing to gain, since it was all apparently the result of yielding to the intolerable pressures of a particular moment, he seems to be curiously innocent, hardly responsible. We have an extreme case of what we observe every day – the fact that all our decisions, actions, even our conscious reflection, are affected within a situation in which the facticity of our physical bodies plays a major role. But if we are tempted to say that Meursault's act was determined and that he was not responsible for it, we realise immediately that this is not determination of the usual sort. Meursault's act is not the kind to be explained by heredity or environmental conditioning.

Despite the prosecutor's pleas, there is nothing in Meursault's previous life to suggest that he would ever get involved in a crime of passion. In fact, the moment of the murder stands out as an

abrupt fissure between the even tone of events in his past and that which is to follow. Meursault's response to the sun and the flash of the knife demonstrates rather the terrifying freedom of the human being, who may at any given instant feel himself cut off from everything which has preceded this act, and who may then do what nothing in his past life or habitual reactions would ever have predicted. Meursault's act suggests the frightening possibility that any one of us might under certain pressures perform an action which we consider absolutely criminal and without any of the accepted criminal motivations. We feel that in his place we might have done as he did, but we cannot feel ourselves to be criminals either now or in the imagined circumstance. If we say Meursault is innocent, we seem to undermine the whole structure of the serious law by condoning a murder for a triviality, 'because of the sun'. But if we condemn him, we are condemning ourselves. It is far easier to let ourselves be persuaded by the prosecutor and conclude that Meursault was preparing himself for the murder.

### **Revolt of the absurd man**

The real issue is whether a society can allow the existence of a man who seems to deny the seriousness, the permanence, and the classifiable predictability of human emotions. After his condemnation, Meursault thinks considerably about the sentence and the impending execution. He does not fear death itself, but he finds it difficult to lose the habit of thinking like a free man; and he unashamedly dislikes the thought of never experiencing again the peaceful happiness of life as he had known it. Consequently, he lets himself hope that his appeal for a pardon will be granted. Then the Chaplain makes a spontaneous visit, and it is in the course of their conversation that with a sudden burst of passion Meursault awakens to a new awareness of himself and of life. The interview had begun like so many others with Meursault's tedious debate about his right to deny God's existence, and then it had drifted on to the question of an afterlife. Meursault admitted that it was natural to wish for another life after death, but that this was of the same order as other impossible wishes, like "wishing to be rich, to swim very fast" (116). He says that the only kind of afterlife which would mean anything to him would be a life in which he could remember this one. The Chaplain tells Meursault that because his "heart is hardened" (117) he cannot see that the priest is on his side, and he promises to pray for Meursault. At this point something in Meursault seems to explode; "something seemed to break inside me, and I started yelling at the top of my

voice" (118). What exasperates him is that the man is so positive. "He seemed so cocksure, you see. And yet not one of his certainties was worth one strand of a woman's hair. Living as he did, like a corpse, he couldn't even be sure of being alive" (118). He states that "actually, I was sure of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming" (118). In the outburst that follows we see the full conscious revolt of the absurd man, since the only certainty is death, there is but one privileged class, those who are still alive.

Sooner or later all are condemned. The ugly dog belonging to Meursault's neighbour Salamano was as important before the dark chill of the future as Salamano's wife. From "the long range point of view all human activities are equal – all are of no importance whatsoever" (119). Meursault's rush of anger seems to wash him clean, to strip him of hope, to render him indifferent. But this indifference has nothing in common with despair or renunciation. Feeling cut off from hope and from the future, he is free. For the first time he can understand why his mother on the brink of death had seemed to start to live again, had played with the idea of taking in a fiancé. Absurd she may have been, but she was not pathetic, and "no one in the world had any right to weep for her" (120). Now on the edge of doom he feels perfectly free, ready to start afresh but liberated from the demands of hope and from the 'meanings' which society had tried to force upon him.

Meursault could find life worthwhile and live without anguish or anxiety because of a certain innocence. Meursault had learned "not to expect much of people" (113) and the result was that he respected their right to live as they pleased and made no demands on them. But once we have begun to reflect on the condition of men in general and in particular circumstances, once we have been engaged in events which shape the lives of others, we can no longer ignore them.

In this novel, discovering one's inwardness and insight reveals itself as being in stark contrast with the body of Christian beliefs that underlies Western civilisation. Most protagonists are "open to insights precisely because they are not convinced Christians with the wealth of doctrine and dogma to rely on; and that it is by contrast with Christianity that the insights concerned stand out as significant" says Macquarrie (272). Thus a good measure of Meursault's development in the second part of *The Stranger* is that while he reacts relatively calmly to having a crucifix thrust under his nose by the examining magistrate just after his arrest, he has an unaccustomed outburst of

anger at the end when the prison Chaplain offers to pray for him. It is essentially in opposition to the Christian perspective that he now asserts his own.

Since the idea of personal immortality is a part of Christianity, it is to be expected that characters in these books will sometimes – by contrast – be preoccupied with the very finality of death. The novel is organized around three deaths. It starts with Meursault's mother's death, followed by the Arab man's death, and then it progresses towards Meursault's execution. During the course of these events, one encounters Meursault's relationships with other people. Even before his imprisonment, Meursault leads what can in some respects be described as a solitary sort of life, in spite of his liaison with Marie and the recent friendship with Raymond. The second chapter of *The Stranger* is dominated by a relatively long description of how Meursault spends a whole boring Sunday alone in his flat. Meursault agrees to marry Marie, but she cannot get him to say he loves her, nor give up any of the freedom associated with his way of life as a somewhat eccentric individual. Meursault is concerned with the inwardness of people, not only his own solitude but also that of the individual and his lot in life. His whole existence is called into question.

The complexity and conflict often involved in human relations stem from individuals' recognition that other people can think about them and judge them, quite independently of their own judgement. This discovery has a vital role to play in *The Stranger*. From the very beginning Meursault shows signs of an uncomfortable awareness of the gaze and judgement of others, but from early in the second part of the book he begins to realise that others see him as a criminal, and this feeling reaches its height during his trial. One of the fundamental changes that comes over Meursault in the course of the book is this full recognition that others see his life and values in an entirely different perspective from his own. He eventually draws strength from this distinction, realizing that he can create his own path in life, and this brings about the final state of exhilaration that he attains at the end of the novel.

One main element in this novel is the belief that we should face up to our metaphysical state and somehow come to terms with it, rather than try to evade it or cover it up in some manner. There is a rather remarkable example of the ideal of lucidity in the last few pages, where Meursault is determined not to die in a state of 'inconscience' and persuades his doctor to give him adrenalin to

keep him conscious up to the very last moment. Indeed, the first part of the last chapter of *The Stranger* is a demonstration of lucidity, with Meursault concentrating all his energies on facing up, in a surprising systematic way, to the facts of his situation.

On the level of individual's relation with himself, Meursault is in an extreme situation and needs to establish and exercise control over himself at the most basic level. Meursault's struggle for control over himself spans the whole of his long period of imprisonment. This does not come easily to him, but he wins the fight and by the end is exercising a marked degree of control, even over his thoughts. Moreover, in a general, if somewhat obscure way Meursault is now in control of his life and values as never before.

Like Plato in *Symposium*, Sartre points out that desire is always a lack (*Being and Nothingness* 246). One desires only what one does not already have. Thus consciousness as a lack of Being is the same as desire, and what it desires is Being-in-itself. Another way of putting it is to say that man, confronting the world, desires in one way or another to appropriate the world or to relate himself to the objects in the world. Man may desire to *do* or *make* something in the world, to *have* something in the world or to *be* something in the world. But *doing* or *making*, Sartre claims, is *having* (576). If an artist creates a book or painting or a symphony, this is because he wants it to exist as an extension of himself to be his as an expression of himself to others. All activity can finally be reduced to projects of appropriation – eating, sexuality, even the pursuit of knowledge.

In his portrayal of man, Camus points out that there is no illusion of there being any ultimate, absolute end. One acts in the interest of relative ends and a limited future. But one commits oneself as fully as if the struggle were for an eternity. The goal is always man himself. As Camus puts it, "every revolution, beginning with that of Prometheus, is against the gods; it is man's assertion of right against his destiny" (*The Rebel* 213). Out of awareness of our mutual solitude is born a sense of human solidarity. Berguno points out that more than any other issue the question of social and political commitment reveals a large area of disagreement among existentialists, but they are unanimous, he says, in believing that "each man's recognition of human interdependence emerges from his lonely, personal rebellion against the human condition" (242).

Camus' political philosophy was first presented in 1951 in *The Rebel*. Before entering upon the critical discussion of historical revolt and revolution which comprises the bulk of the treatise, Camus attempts to bridge the gap between Sisyphus and Prometheus, between the man who decides to live for himself against the universe and the rebel who chooses to die that his fellow men may live better. In the same way that we could say that the problem of *The Myth of Sisyphus* was suicide, so the basic question of *The Rebel* is murder, 'logical murder' performed in the name of a political ideal. In the earlier pages the question of whether murder can be justified amounts to asking whether we are in any way obligated to respect another's right to live. Referring back to his earlier study of absurdity, Camus points out that the absurd attitude regarding murder leads to a contradiction. On the one hand, we have to recognise that if there is no meaning and if we can assert no ultimate value, then "everything is possible and nothing has any importance" (*The Rebel* 250). We may choose between cultivating indifference or participating in the game of power where human lives are counters. In either case there is no justice or injustice but only masters and slaves.

The absurd man, Camus reminds us, suffers in solitude as he encounters the absurdity and apparent sterility of the world. His first step out of his isolation comes at that moment when he realises that all other people feel this same sense of strangeness and estrangement, that the whole human race "suffers from that distance between itself and the world" (220). Once I realise that I am not alone in facing the absurd, I am drawn out of my isolation. I can no longer feel that the confrontation is a lonely one even if I should wish to do so. My rebellion against my personal situation is transformed into a revolt against the human condition.

### **Authenticity and the creative life**

One passage in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* implies that there just possibly might be a meaning to things, but that it certainly is not one which is significant for man in his present state. Therefore, even in the interests of this possibility, the best man can do is to struggle against death and meaninglessness:

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a

personal fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 4)

Meursault's strange happiness is a joy in life itself and is inseparably connected with his delight in the beauty of the world and in his physical contact with the sun and sea. That these feelings of Meursault are also those of Camus is evident if we look at a series of lyrical essays by Camus, written at various times in his life, short pieces which give one the impression that they have been felt rather than thought – though with Camus thought and feeling seem to move together. It seems that in Camus ideas and emotions re-enforce one another. There is evidence even within the essays that Camus' delight in the world accompanies and perhaps even partly stems from the belief in the total indifference of the world. In *The Minotaur*, a half-descriptive, half-poetic evaluation of life in the North African city of Oran, he concludes his picture of desert and sea with words which might easily have come from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "Here are opposed to each other magnificent human anarchy and the permanence of an always equal sea" (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 163). A few pages later he makes it clear that the longing to be identified with the absolute universe of suns and stones is a temptation: "There is in every man a profound impulse which is neither one of destruction nor of creation. It is merely the impulse to be one with nothingness" (164). The absurd man, Sisyphus, Meursault, all feel free to love the world and even to sense a kind of alliance with it at that moment when they realise that they – like it – have no higher meaning in the over-all structure of things. What Camus seems to say is that hope of some controlling purpose which would make this life other than it appears to be is equivalent to taking away all significance from this life as we know it. For such hope is equivalent to resignation, and we have seen in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that the decision to live is a revolt.

Existentialism postulates that existence precedes essence, that man is in a position of self-creator and therefore is responsible for his own existence and identity. This view, while elevating man to a position of self-creator, also brings a sense of forlornness, anguish and despair. And since, existentially speaking, man is unable to refer to absolute values, since human nature is not a static, preconceived, fixed substance, man, as Sartre put it, "is condemned to be free" (*Existentialism and Human Emotion* 15). In this way every action, every feeling, and every thought becomes a subject

for the judgement of each individual consciousness, each choice is a conscious choice, each individual, in the absence of the Judge, is his own judge. The words freedom, isolation, responsibility, judgement, anguish, authentic existence and choice take on new meanings in this context. The themes of alienation, spiritual exile and the inability to transcend anxiety, which a state of consciousness creates, did not rest with philosophers alone, but were expressed and continued to be expressed, by writers whose material has always been the universal concerns of their age.

Camus explores the problems of man in a state of consciousness, man confronting not only the unknown forces of the universe, but also the dark forces and drives within himself. The conscious man must wrestle with all the contradictions and paradoxes of his inner self, with fluctuating emotions and with perpetual alternations of his perceptions. In a state of consciousness man is constantly judging himself, seeking judgement that is never to be final. Aware of the unconscious, man must forever re-evaluate his conscious life without the help of external factors or of divine or secular authority. Aware of the multiplicity of forces known and unknown to him, a conscious man can never trust his self-evaluation; he is never able to say the last word about himself. A state of consciousness reveals not only the death of illusions, but also a state of isolation from all those who still cherish those illusions. Yet a rejection of those illusions, on which the common man thrives, does not kill a longing for their comforts. The knowledge that man, if he is conscious, is inevitably alienated from those who ask no questions, or who are satisfied with a priori answers, is both satisfying and disturbing. The realisation that a common man lives an un-examined and therefore an incomplete life, brings forth the question of what constitutes an authentic existence and how authentic living is to be attained.

Taking the idea of the absurd, which is the formulation of a conscious mind, Camus concludes that though the universe is meaningless in metaphysical terms, it is neither sterile nor futile in human terms. Out of this seeming futility man creates and makes sense of the world, he is responsible not only for the particular uses of his own freedom, but for freedom itself. Man's creativity is the creation of self. The individual who lives authentically creates meaning.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

From this study of Dostoevsky, Kafka and Camus there has emerged an image of the solitary man the significance of which extends far beyond the personal existences and immediate cultures that these authors represented. If one looks at the collection of cases touched on, it is clear that the pressure of social judgement is just one aspect of a gloomy and pessimistic picture of personal relations in general presented in these novels. The dominant pattern is that of breakdown or discontinuation, or at least an attenuation of the quality of relationships. The movement, as we have seen, is invariably towards the greater isolation of the main characters, and recognition of what underlies this movement constitutes one way in which the characters may make insightful and creative discoveries.

Granted, there is a certain level of generality. The metaphysical truths that Dostoevsky, Kafka and Camus all see their characters as facing are similar: contingency, the embodiment of consciousness, the finality of death, the deep divide between individuals. Whatever else these narratives may do, above all they show us characters reacting to their conditions of existence with varying degrees of lucidity and self-deception, and various combinations of the two. One element common to these ethical perspectives, however vague it may seem, is the belief that we should face up squarely and unequivocally to our existential state and somehow come to terms with it, rather than try to evade it or cover it up in some manner.

The creative individual wants to become a member of the community and to find the confirmation that will answer his call. He cannot do so, however, precisely because his position as an individual puts him in the wrong relationship to the community and to those who might confirm him. A character like K. or Meursault is excluded from the 'true way' by his very nature and situation. Dostoevsky's starting point is not the romantic hero, but the Underground Man, and the romantic rebellion of the Underground Man, where it occurs, is never more than an attempt to escape alienation, an attempt to break out of the 'underground' into some kind of real existence. The romantic hero who can persist to the end in his noble rebellion and his defiance no longer exists

here. Camus begins with the man facing him as well with himself, the recognition that his own existence is limited by the existence of the other. However, the individual eventually accepts and even embraces the absurdity of life. Albert Camus' Sisyphus is the often-cited example of such an existential anti-hero. Sisyphus not only accepts his fate, he sees his acceptance as a form of revolt against the absurdity. Kafka's characters, too, accept their fates and embrace the absurdity of the universe.

All creativity is an attempt to resolve the dialectic of detachment from and attachment to the concrete. Writers like Kafka, Dostoevsky and Camus stake out a new realm of meaning and must move in 'fear and trembling'. The individual creates out of his whole existence and cannot define the part of his existence which belongs to his struggle with meaning and that which does not. What is more, since he is engaged in creating unique meaning, he cannot have any sure ground on which to stand, but must constantly be exposed to the despair that comes when he doubts his own struggle, or when existence itself seems to shift beneath him, making all his images and formulations invalid.

Kafka describes absurd situations with simple, cold words. He does not shock readers with detailed descriptions of horrific scenes; instead, he resorts to blunt absurdity. In *The Trial*, Joseph K., the prisoner, is stabbed to death. To most readers, this would seem a cruel and unreasonable death. However, to Kafka, death might have been better than a lengthy, illogical punishment. Kafka explores what it means to continue to be 'I' in a world that offers neither confirmation nor personal meaning to the 'I'. He sees the person as existing in relation to a world that calls him into existence. The self needs a personal meaning for its very existence and continuity as self, yet it is confronted by an absurd reality which seems by its very nature to offer no personal meaning. Meaning can be found, if at all, only through the attitude of the man who is willing to live with the absurd, to remain open to the mystery which he can never hope to pin down.

These authors knew much about genius which, as Kierkegaard remarked, "like a thunderstorm comes up against the wind" (*Papers & Journals* 17), and about great men who are "dangerous, accidents, exceptions, tempests which are strong enough to question things which it has taken

time to build and establish” (18). They themselves probably destroyed nothing, but they certainly participated in dissolution and picked up no pieces.

The following passage from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is typical:

While objective thought is indifferent to the thinking subject and this existence, the subjective thinker is an existing individual essentially interested in his own thinking, existing as he does in his thought....In [objective] thinking, he thinks the universal; but as existing in this thought and as assimilating it in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated. (12)

Camus follows suit by saying in *The Myth of Sisyphus*; “For everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it” (4), which appears in the context of a reflective detachment from life's routines

Being solitary becomes a way of life as people realise connecting in the world is an unrealistic dream. If, as Sartre famously argues, people must define themselves through choices and living, then the characters in the novels we have examined have chosen to be individuals apart from their communities. They are no longer essential to their communities but insist on remaining true to their natures.

Known for its ‘story-within,’ *The Trial* was one of Kafka’s favourite works. As with Kafka’s other works, the reader meets a man witnessing an absurd form of ‘justice’ — a legal system without logic. *The Trial* represents a common theme in Kafka’s stories: all people are guilty of something and the punishments are in inverse proportion to the sin. Camus draws attention to the necessity for solitude in confronting existence:

There are no more deserts. There are no more islands. Yet there is a need for them. In order to understand the world, one has to turn away from it on occasion; in order to serve men better, one has to hold them at a distance for a time. But where can one find the solitude necessary to vigour, the deep breath

in which the mind collects itself and courage gauges its strength? (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* 32)

Camus' contention, that the relationship between man and world is essentially absurd, is illustrated time and again in Kafka's work. Many of Kafka's characters could be accused of being over cerebral. Here we can see a parallel with Dostoevsky's Underground Man who was envious of people who could act without thinking. If he was insulted he could not even be sure of the exact nature of the insult, his active imagination would brood over the insult until it was blown out of all proportion, and by this time any act of revenge would seem ridiculous. He could be accused of being too lazy to perform an act of revenge. The Underground Man knows this is not true, even though he wishes it were:

Oh! if only it were out of laziness that I've done nothing. Good heavens, I should have had so much self-respect. I should have respected myself precisely because I was at any rate capable of being lazy; there would at least have been one seemingly positive characteristic in which I myself could have believed. (30)

The Underground Man realises that no simple label would be enough, because there would always be some doubt as to the applicability of any such label. It is because he is conscious that he doubts the certainty of any position, and because of this doubt that he tends to inertia, but he knows that this doubt is essential to humanity. If all doubt were removed, if a scientific utopia were to be achieved and a man's actions were to be clearly defined without doubt then all freedom would be lost and man would no longer be man. All of these authors agree that man confronts a missing God and an indifferent universe. They recognise that man's natural environment is uncertainty. As Dostoevsky says:

I believe this, I will vouch for it because this whole human business seems really only to consist of the fact that man has been continually proving to himself that he's a man and not an organ stop. (41)

Camus' call to face the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* forces us to have a dialogue with the absurd – the affirmation of a concrete reality that we can meet yet cannot comprehend as it is in itself apart from that meeting. The dialogue with the absurd here means an open-minded and courageous standing one's ground before a world to which one can ascribe no independent, objective meaning. Like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the individual sees death as the final term of absurdity set to his own attempts at a meaningful existence. It is death, too, which reduces all attempts at communication between persons to permanent silence. The individual wants to become a member of the community and to find the confirmation that will answer his call; he cannot do so, however, precisely because his position as an 'individual' places him in the wrong relationship to the community and to those who might confirm him. A man like K. in *The Trial* is thus excluded from the 'true way' by his very nature and situation.

But can there be a true way which is not available to the unique person who must follow it? This condition is the inescapable personal struggle of each one of us. Each of us, in his/her unique tension of compulsion and responsibility, must try to find a way forward which will be true – both to ourselves and to the situation to which we must respond. In this struggle, there remains a possibility of being an authentic individual who creates himself as he wills himself to be.

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