

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1957**



**Albert Camus**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1957 was awarded to Albert Camus *"for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times"*.**

French literature is no longer linked geographically to the frontiers of France in Europe. In many respects it reminds one of a garden plant, noble and irreplaceable, which when cultivated outside its territory still retains its distinctive character, although tradition and variation alternately influence it. The Nobel Laureate for this year, Albert Camus, is an example of this evolution. Born in a small town in eastern Algeria, he has returned to this North African milieu to find the source of all the determining influences that have marked his childhood and youth. Even today, the man Camus is aware of this great French overseas territory, and the writer in him is often pleased to recall this fact.

From a quasi-proletarian origin, Camus found it necessary to get ahead in life on his own; a poverty-stricken student, he worked at all sorts of jobs to meet his needs. It was an arduous schooling, but one which, in the diversity of its teaching, was certainly not useless to the realist he was to become. In the course of his years of study, which he spent at the

University of Algiers, he belonged to a circle of intellectuals who later came to play an important role in the North African Resistance. His first books were published by a local publishing house in Algiers, but at the age of twenty-five he reached France as a journalist and soon came to make his reputation in the metropolis as a writer of the first rank, prematurely tempered by the harsh, feverish atmosphere of the war years.

Even in his first writings Camus reveals a spiritual attitude that was born of the sharp contradictions within him between the awareness of earthly life and the gripping consciousness of the reality of death. This is more than the typical Mediterranean fatalism whose origin is the certainty that the sunny splendour of the world is only a fugitive moment bound to be blotted out by the shades. Camus represents also the philosophical movement called Existentialism, which characterizes man's situation in the universe by denying it all personal significance, seeing in it only absurdity. The term "absurd" occurs often in Camus's writings, so that one may call it a leitmotif in his work, developed in all its logical moral consequences on the levels of freedom, responsibility, and the anguish that derives from it. The Greek myth of Sisyphus, who eternally rolls his rock to the mountain top from which it perpetually rolls down again, becomes, in one of Camus's essays, a laconic symbol of human life. But Sisyphus, as Camus interprets him, is happy in the depth of his soul, for the attempt alone satisfies him. For Camus, the essential thing is no longer to know whether life is worth living but *how* one must live it, with the share of sufferings it entails.

This short presentation does not permit me to dwell longer on Camus's always fascinating intellectual development. It is more worthwhile to refer to the works in which, using an art with complete classical purity of style and intense concentration, he has embodied these problems in such fashion that characters and action make his ideas live before us, without commentary by the author. This is what makes *L'Étranger* (The Stranger), 1942, famous. The main character, an employee of a government department, kills an Arab following a chain of absurd events; then, indifferent to his fate, he hears himself condemned to death. At the last moment, however, he pulls himself together and

emerges from a passivity bordering on torpor. In *La Peste* (The Plague), 1947, a symbolic novel of greater scope, the main characters are Doctor Rieux and his assistant, who heroically combat the plague that has descended on a North African town. In its calm and exact objectivity, this convincingly realistic narrative reflects experiences of life during the Resistance, and Camus extols the revolt which the conquering evil arouses in the heart of the intensely resigned and disillusioned man.

Quite recently Camus has given us the very remarkable story-monologue, *La Chute* (The Fall), 1956, a work exhibiting the same mastery of the art of storytelling. A French lawyer, who examines his conscience in a sailors' bar in Amsterdam, draws his own portrait, a mirror in which his contemporaries can equally recognize themselves. In these pages one can see Tartuffe shake hands with the Misanthrope in the name of that science of the human heart in which classical France excelled. The mordant irony, employed by an aggressive author obsessed with truth, becomes a weapon against universal hypocrisy. One may wonder, of course, where Camus is heading by his insistence on a Kierkegaardian sense of guilt whose bottomless abyss is omnipresent, for one always has the feeling that the author has reached a turning point in his development.

Personally Camus has moved far beyond nihilism. His serious, austere meditations on the duty of restoring without respite that which has been ravaged, and of making justice possible in an unjust world, rather make him a humanist who has not forgotten the worship of Greek proportion and beauty as they were once revealed to him in the dazzling summer light on the Mediterranean shore at Tipasa.

Active and highly creative, Camus is in the centre of interest in the literary world, even outside of France. Inspired by an authentic moral engagement, he devotes himself with all his being to the great fundamental questions of life, and certainly this aspiration corresponds to the idealistic end for which the Nobel Prize was established. Behind his incessant affirmation of the absurdity of the human condition is no sterile negativism. This view of things is supplemented in him by a powerful imperative, a nevertheless, an appeal



to the will which incites to revolt against absurdity and which, for that reason, creates a value.

***For more details please visit:***

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