

The Mirror

Sisyphus, The Tragedy of

Comrade Candle

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INTRODUCTION TO SISYPHUS, THE MYTH OF

A Greek tragic (anti-)hero, Sisyphus provided the French philosopher Albert Camus a classic illustration of the absurd in his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Speaking as a prisoner, a nihilist, and a lover of tragedy, I love Sisyphus. He was a professional highwayman, a trickster whose exploits inspired my writing of this epic — I too am a (former) robber. Among his feats, Sisyphus outsmarted Death by slipping him into chains. Imprisoned, Death was unable to claim any life and civilization collapsed. Sisyphus was eventually contained and sent to Hades, where he convinced Persephone to let him return to his wife — once again escaping the Underworld. When Hades finally collects the rogue man, Sisyphus is punished for a mortal life of thievery, of mocking the rules of the gods. He is sentenced to an eternal task: roll a boulder up a hill, only to have it fall ad infinitum. In his essay, Camus considers that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.” He argues that one must find happiness in the accomplishment of the task, rather than in extracting the meaning from it.

THE EPIC & THE TRAGEDY, A CRASH COURSE

To the uninitiated, the epic may appear daunting. Long-form poetry is not as ever-present now as in the days when tragic comedies were written, memorized, acted, and recited to worship Apollo. Homeric epics, namely the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were written in strict dactylic hexameter, as was Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In poetics, meter denotes how many steps (a collection of syllables) are present per line, while “-ic” denotes the number of syllables per step and which syllables receive hard/soft emphasis. As I write in English (not ancient Greek nor Latin), I chose to compromise with iambic hexameter — one more step than Shakespearean iambic pentameter. In short, each line has twelve syllables (six steps), and every other syllable receives “emphasis.” I have strictly followed this structure.

I have aimed to construct an enjoyable tragic hero. Time and victory are fleeting for Sisyphus, unless we adhere to Camus’s conclusion. For the ancient Greeks (prior to the Academy), the memorization of Homer constituted a mark of intelligence. Schooling involved learning to appropriately act or recite the epics. Hubris is integral to tragedy; through it the hero’s undoing becomes the poetic, impactful, and (at times) unjust resolution.

SISYPHUS, THE TRAGEDY OF

Free spirit, death defied, has freshened dawn become
Lightened of torment forthcome as life’s due payment
Fresh air’s breath expels cold sorrow frosting heart numb
“Where shall I go prior death’s upset arraignment?
Shall I just flee to see once more Apollo’s rise —
Doubt that I have of ever knowing peaceful sight
While defiance brings civilization’s demise”
Joyous notes of hearty laughter provide respite

“I would rather live as I so choose to exist
Be damned what great risk I continue to garner!
To fool Hades merely to cowardly subsist
Would be wasteful of what great wit I have harbored”
Sisyphus, our hero, has set his path onward
Toward his old profession as an outlaw robber
While below Hades’s chained calls have yet to be heard
Regardless of intense frothing and much slobber
“Challenge my rule today for all of your renown
Surely you must expect my wrath will be unseen
I will personally see to bring you back down
So that you can understand what punishment means!
Gods do not take kindly to being outsmarted
Nor the shattering of the order we uphold”
Soundless to Sisyphus who has just now started
Ventures so fiery to demand one be bold
Stepping over fencing surrounding lowly farm
“Where can the brave find a dagger to make their own?
Lying around servicing no potential harm
Or even grasped by those who have yet to have shown
Any propensity for culling expertise
I will find my new blade wherever it may lie”
Darting and weaving amongst sparsely present hay
Concealed, but barely, leaving ample room to vie
For farm’s existence as more than but dreary tease
“The gods cannot hope to keep my weapon away
I will certainly collect what my craft demands”
Much rifling through that which is present outside
Shows only the devotion of Sisyphus stands.
“I see that, like every thief, you too have no pride
Pilfering what little my farm and I possess
I’d ask that you return what, of mine, you’ve taken
Though it seems likely you’d need be under duress”
Farmer with pitchfork, intended use forsaken

Having grown weary of such useless dialogue
A raising of the pitchfork serving as prologue
Hardened muscles tightly grip a worn wooden shaft
Stern and angry jobs accompanied by much bay
That Sisyphus will leave the farmer's possessions
Protecting the homestead for yet another day
Sisyphus in acting may appear at first daft
In holding fast to his ground despite aggressions
Yet farmer charges forward and Sisyphus dives
Tumbling as struggle descends to grassy floor
Spiteful of the cause for which Sisyphus still strives
Farmer fervently fights as if he were at war
Still, Sisyphus triumphs now – holding new weapon
“You'd do well to deliver me a better blade
I'll be brief in telling you that which would happen:
Without deliverance, your life is what you trade
For this slight against my newfound time, here, on earth”
Frightened mortally, measuring life beyond worth
Much scuttling about gifts Sisyphus his wish
Throwing pitchfork aside, a warning is issued:
Sisyphus, magnanimous, is no lowly fish
To be treated in ways that are petty and rude
One should think of Poseidon to grasp what one meets
When it is the hero Sisyphus who one greets!
Apollo, having heard many cries, travels down
Assuming the appearance of a rich merchant
In the aim of halting one man's insurrection
He will wager to Sisyphus his laurel crown
Through a carefully chosen skilled competition
Sisyphus will truthfully learn if his penchant
Lies among the gods rather than mere mortal men
Ambitious ascent to godhood will not slacken
Having placed himself between hero and Delphi
Apollo awaits for the tides to finally crash

Wanting for Sisyphus to at least have a try
He refrains from trying to do anything brash
As farm's departure continues ongoing joy
Sisyphus marauds on toward the nearest city
Surprised yet thankful at spotting someone pretty
He dashes out from bush to enact his swift ploy
"I can see your riches are flagrantly displayed
Truly a shame that your path and mine have now crossed
For now all you own you can count to have been lost
As an offering at my feet lest you be flayed"
Rather than fold to a mortal's dismal demand
Apollo unsheathes a golden, glistening sword
Now having revealed a good portion of his hand,
He addresses Sisyphus of his own accord
"I have an inkling of how the gods have been wronged
Though I'm not here to discuss Hades's present plight
The weapon you wield would have been better if pronged
And you'll certainly regret that you forsook height
I offer you my crown and my Olympus seat
Should it prove possible that you can best my feat"
Beckoning Sisyphus, Apollo heads to creek
Pausing briefly at the edge yet not looking meek
With only one thrust, he raises his sword, gleaming,
Seven fish harpooned upon a blade, some steaming
Yet Sisyphus pauses then with dagger, he jabs
Only to find that with any subsequent stabs
The results would be the same: only spearing three.
So as Sisyphus turns in an attempt to flee
He is seized by Apollo, dragged to Hades's ask
Given naught more to do than roll his big boulder
Only to find as he ever completes his task
The temperature in his heart grows colder.| CC

LINE NOTES

1 | As the absurd subject, it naturally follows to label Sisyphus a free spirit (a term denoting its literal meaning, yet also “being a follower of Nietzsche’s teaching”).

3 | Punishment chills one’s heart, I notice as I look upon the prison. Fresh air is what we most live for, in here and out there.

4 | Couldn’t resist a playful use of “arraignment,” to this story as allegory.

5 | I could imagine Sisyphus, a patron deity of *agéneios* (beardless) man, begin Apollonian, also foreshadowing.

7 | Given naught can die, Sisyphus shattered society’s “truth” of death and taxes. Hades’s confinement birthed a new state.

9–12 | Sisyphus presents as the “subject in revolt,” a term I borrow from insurrectionist theory – also, hubris.

17–22 | Hard not to image Disney’s Hades, try as I may. Still, Hades seems less of a “hothead” as I image him, more cold, more vindictive.

24–5 | Back in the day, peasant farmers were called on to become soldiers! So the demos (common people) were more “hard” and tough. Compare what Sisyphus does to a home invasion at some rural modern-day farm, he’d probably get shot.

30 | Fate was a staple of the Greek culture and thereby mythos. Sisyphus is certain of his fate – more hubris? Does he think himself capable of Apollonian feats?

34–5 | Certainly by now. Also, I use “craft” to stay true to the Greek *techne*.

38–41 | Total paradigm shift; also foreshadowing.

42 | Virgil’s epitaph read: *Mantua me genuit; Calabri rapuere; tenet nunc Parthenope. Cecini pascua, rura, duces* (Mantua gave birth to me, the Calabrians took me, now Naples holds me; I sang of pastures [the *Eclogues*], country [the *Georgics*], and leaders [the *Aeneid*]).

45 | Am I too Nietzschean? I am reminded that Sisyphus is about to surpass man during his downfall.

49 | Would we expect less?

54 | Another ode to Virgil.

56 | “Better” at what?

60 | As most do.

63 | Fish?

64 | Respect Sisyphus!

65 | Equal to the god?

67 | Back in the day, Apollo was “the shit,” having a hand in plenty of mythos.

70 | Not the first such wager Apollo can see the future after all. A warning should Apollo wish to gamble with you...

74 | Hubris rarely does.

75 | “Know thyself.”

81 | In ancient Greek, nobility, aristocrat, and wealth implied beauty, hence, “pretty.”

82 | Double-edged sword – notice a pacing change? Sometimes life comes at you fast.

84 | Hecate?

86 | “Offering.”

91–6 | Greek gods are known for being all-too-human.

97 | More of said humans.

98 | As if he knows already.

100–3 | For the fellow math nerds, that's rate of change for you.

106–8 | Circular? Perhaps one day Sisyphus will escape his perpetual boulder rolling.
Prometheus?

RECOMMENDED READING

Sophocles' *Antigone*, as it features a woman hero.

Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for obvious reasons.

Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Dionysian Vision of the World*, to grasp my love for Apollo and to a degree, tragedy.

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