

"THE FALL" BY ALBERT CAMUS:
A STUDY IN ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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Alfred Adler's concept of mental health is based on man's social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*), his most important tie with reality. Adler maintains that lack of social feeling distinguishes the neurotic constitution to which the goal of personal superiority is invariably linked. At the root of the neurotic's exaggerated concern with his self-esteem is the feeling of inferiority which is based on a real or imagined deficiency. The pathologic fear of the neurotic character is the fear of being found worthless. In situations of real life the neurotic character always wants to feel himself to be above and on top. He may even serve the community above reproach, yet, as Adler shrewdly remarks, there is such a thing as a pretense of social interest which conceals a lack of social feeling.

When reading Camus' *The Fall* (5), one is struck by the many important aspects in which the hero of the novel reflects Adler's ideas of the neurotic character to an amazing degree (1-4). The purpose of this paper is to develop this proposition. Since the novel is narrated in the form of a monologue, as a confession made to a stranger, every statement about the personality of the hero is an act of self-evaluation. In the following essay these statements are usually rendered verbatim from the novel.

BEFORE THE FALL

Jean-Baptiste Clamance, a bachelor in his forties, was a well-known lawyer in Paris with a specialty: He handled mostly "noble" cases such as those of orphans and widows. It might have appeared as if he were motivated by social interest, yet he admitted that his reward was not the help he gave, but his "satisfaction at being on the right side of the bar" and the opportunity of indulging himself in "an instinctive scorn for judges in general."

He also loved to help blind people across the street and would even snatch them from another helping hand. After leading them to safety he would tip his hat—not to him who could not see, but to the public witnessing his act of mercy.

His relation to women further revealed his lack of social feeling. Sensuality was paramount in his love life. He considered true de-

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bauchery liberating "because it creates no obligations." Whenever he made any of his mistresses swear not to give themselves to any other man, the oath they swore liberated him while binding them for the sole purpose of assuring his power. He "could live happily only on condition that all the individuals on earth were devoid of an independent life," to receive it only at his bidding.

His feeling of superiority knew no limitation. He looked upon himself "as something of a superman," felt "like a king's son or a burning bush" (God's appearance in his confrontation with Moses). Clamance had never ceased wanting to be immortal. Even after his fall he tasted the intoxication of feeling "like God."

He always had to imagine himself above others—several times he refused the Legion of Honor. Moreover, he "never felt comfortable except in lofty places." Living aloft was to him "the only way of being seen and hailed by the largest number." On boats he was "the eternal pacer of the top deck." In court he sat above the judge whom he judged in turn, and he "recognized no equals." Even in a field in which he easily admitted his inferiority, like tennis, he was convinced that "with a little time for practice" he would defeat the best players. He was "always bursting with vanity . . . living without any other continuity than that, from day to day, of I, I, I," never remembering anything but himself.

Clamance felt perfectly happy. He bathed in the joy of self-esteem. He had realized that human affairs need be no serious matter, and that he moved only on the surface of life in the sphere of words, never in reality.

CRACKS IN THE FICTION

According to Adler, the lofty goal of the neurotic is designed to hide strong feelings of inferiority. Clamance's vanity, his feeling of being a superman in every field of human endeavor, were designed to conceal the one quality missing in him—courage. Above all, Clamance wanted to be a hero.

However, he had often been told that his face was shy, and he had chosen a niche in his profession in which he was rather safe from competition. Moreover, a deep-seated fear made it impossible for him to cross a bridge at night, the result of a vow he had given to himself. If someone should jump into the water, he argued, one would either have to fish him out and run a considerable risk, or let him drown. But he realized "suppressed dives could leave one strangely aching."

The first indication of a serious doubt in his perfection occurred when he looked at the Seine one dark night and enjoyed a vast feeling of power and completion. At this moment laughter burst out behind him. Yet, there was no one there. He heard the laughter a second time behind himself as if it were drifting downstream. Soon it ceased. He went home and suddenly heard laughter under his window. Once in a while he seemed to hear the laughter within himself. Although the laughter had been almost friendly it had shaken him. Life became less easy for him. It seemed to him that he was half unlearning what he had never had to learn—how to live. His health posed problems for the first time in his life.

THE FIRST CRISIS

Soon thereafter an episode occurred which suddenly revealed his lack of courage. It took place in full view of the public. A little man had placed his motorcycle in front of Clamance's car and tried in vain to revive his stalled engine. Clamance asked him with his usual courtesy to take his motorcycle out of his way and let him pass. The man on the cycle answered with crude phrases which climaxed in the offer to give him a thorough beating. Clamance's rage was aroused and he got out of his car to give him a thrashing. Suddenly a man from the crowd that had gathered rushed at him and shouted at him that he would not allow him to strike a man with a motorcycle between his legs. Hardly had Clamance turned his head when he felt a violent blow on his ear and heard the motorcycle ride away. He was dazed, returned quietly to his car and drove off, instead of giving a drubbing to the fellow who had interfered and had greeted him with "poor dope" for a farewell.

Although Clamance had many excuses he realized that he had "collapsed in public." When he recollected this episode his self-esteem was severely undermined. He had dreamed "of being a complete man" who wanted to dominate in all things, but to maintain this exalted picture of himself was no longer possible. After this episode he began to laugh at himself, at his speeches and pleadings in court.

THE SECOND CRISIS

Another episode occurred, this time without a witness. Clamance had returned to the left bank an hour past midnight. A young woman he passed on the bridge was leaning over the railing. After a moment's hesitation he went on, when suddenly he heard the sound of a body

striking the water. He stopped, yet did not turn around. Several times he heard a cry. Abruptly it ceased. Standing motionless and listening, he felt an irresistible weakness. He went home and informed no one. Thereafter he lost his strength completely. "The whole universe then began to laugh" at him. His mask of perfection had finally dropped. He was a coward.

AFTER THE FALL

The heavily veiled, aggressive and vindictive elements which Adler indicates as being present in most neurotics now came to the surface. Clamance's clients became scarce. He no longer believed in what he was saying. Alcohol and debauchery became his solace. He moved to a dingy room over a sailor's bar where he became guardian of a masterpiece by van Eyck, "The Just Judges." The painting had been stolen from an altar where it had been replaced by an excellent copy. Thus again, Clamance dominated. The world admired the wrong judges while he alone knew the true ones.

He no longer had any possessions. In his small room he felt like a king, pope and judge. His new profession consisted of indulging in public confessions in which he accused himself, though never crudely, in front of listeners. After saying, "I was the lowest of the low," he found a transition to the listener. The more he accused himself, the more he acquired the right to judge the others. Again he was on top of them.

COMMENTS

Adler made a distinction between the neurotic disposition or character and the actual neurosis. It would be futile to make further comparisons between Clamance's neurosis and Adler's concept because, after all, Clamance is a creation of fiction, and a very special one. He displays all the qualities of a neurotic disposition. After the two incidents which destroyed his self-esteem and revealed his cowardice to himself and to the world, one might expect a complete breakdown into a neurosis. Yet, although his fall was deep, there was no neurotic breakdown but a resurrection of his self-esteem, this time based on truth.

Although he claimed that he had become lucid after the second crisis, he had not given up his claim of superiority. Again he felt himself to be on a summit, but this summit was on the negative side of life. He had accepted himself, though jokingly on the spur of a moment, as the man with the most failings among a group of prison-

ers. In this aspect he had not changed—in spite of the deep-reaching change which had occurred.

If one distinguishes between what a person is, what he wants to become, and what he wants to appear, a neurosis may develop from the tension between what a person is and what he wants to appear. Clamance never had a healthy ambition to improve himself, but had concentrated his energy on the appearance of perfection. Mere appearance is threatened every day and must be defended every day. This fight to maintain a false identity does not permit the feeling of continuity, but only that of a sequence of I, I, I. After his fall, Clamance no longer claimed perfection but had accepted himself with all his shortcomings. He had regained his personal identity and with it his memory, which encompasses the I and the world.

Clamance called himself a happy man during the period in which he was a successful lawyer in the limelight of bourgeois society and in harmony with its values. Yet, the basis of this happiness was shaky. There was that laughter that ridiculed his pretense. After his fall he still claimed happiness, and this time his claim was on solid ground. He had accepted himself with his failings, accepted duplicity as a way of life, and was no longer engaged in the daily defense of a fake identity. In his self-chosen exile over the sailor's bar, Clamance called himself "happy unto death."

POSTSCRIPT

The dimensions of the hero in Camus' novel far exceed what has been presented here. Clamance belongs to the type of hero whom Camus himself characterized as "absurd," and whom Sartre describes as one who will not commit suicide: "He wants to live without relinquishing any of his certainty, without a future, without hope, without illusion and without resignation either" (6).

If this is a portrait of modern man—is he curable?

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