



[The Fall](#), by Albert Camus

In A Nutshell

The Fall is the fictional, first person confession of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a Parisian expatriate. Jean-Baptiste used to be a hotshot defense lawyer, but suddenly realized his life was hypocritical and now lives out his days in a seedy bar in Amsterdam. The novel puts you in the center of the action (not unlike those "Choose Your Own Adventure " books) because Jean-Baptiste talks to you while you're sitting by him in said seedy bar.

But *The Fall* is famous for more than its interesting narrative technique. For one, it was written by Albert Camus, a French thinker known for his philosophy of the absurd, a close cousin to existentialism, and his frenemy status with Jean-Paul Sartre, another French philosopher of the mid-1900s. (Note that throughout his life Camus maintained that he was not an existentialist.) Now, Camus is most famous for three big novels. The first is *The Stranger*, published in 1942, which tells the story of a detached, emotionless man convicted of murder, who finds existential freedom while in prison awaiting his death. The second is *The Plague*, in 1947, which revolves around an outbreak of the bubonic plague in an Algerian town, and the struggle of its citizens to deal with human suffering. And of course, the third is *The Fall*, in 1956, published shortly before Camus was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize in Literature. Camus died only three years afterwards, making *The Fall* his final piece of fiction.

Through these three novels, as well as his other works, Camus establishes and explores several ideas of his philosophy. In many ways, *The Fall* can be seen as the high point of Camus's

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thinking. His ideas increase in complexity over the course of his novels. You'll probably notice that interpreting and analyzing *The Plague* is more difficult than taking on *The Stranger*, and likewise, *The Fall* is more challenging than the works which precede it. But don't take our word for it. Sartre himself said that *The Fall* was the most beautiful of Camus's works, but also the least understood. Scholar David R. Ellison says "it seems as if no real progress has been made in deciphering the text's central enigmas." For you, this is good news and bad. The bad news is no one can tell you with any real authority exactly how to interpret *The Fall*. The good news is you can interpret it however you want.

You may find it helpful to read Camus's novels in the order in which they were written. It's fascinating to see the way his ideas grow over time, and it's also useful to gain some experience with Camus before you tackle his final work of fiction. Still, if you haven't read *The Stranger* or *The Plague*, don't worry; we'll get you through *The Fall* unscathed, or at least with only minor injuries.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 At what point are we first certain that the narrator is male? At what point do we assume that the narrator is a male?
- 2 How do the goings-on between the narrator and the reader (for example, when Jean-Baptiste talks about the speed of the boat moving on the Zuider Zee, or when he stops you to move under a portico because it's raining) correspond to what's happening in his

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story about his fall? Do they relate at all, or is the present-day Amsterdam stuff just a pleasant interruption?

3 Are we supposed to hate Jean-Baptiste? Are you inclined to while reading *The Fall*?

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