

Resignation in the Face of Death as Depicted in Popular Culture

A Vaguely Existential Standpoint

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· The Story

There is something about resignation that stirs the heart.

I remember reading a story years ago and crying over it. The thing itself was by no means a literary masterpiece; poorly written, even, as far as I can remember, and nothing but a superfluous romance now lost among the murky depths of the Internet¹.

The story as I recall it is simple: in the late 19th century a young Russian squire—handsome, educated, melancholy as a result of being educated, idle and remarkably philistine despite efforts to appear otherwise—meets and falls in love with a student revolutionary, who, awed by his oratory skills and enamoured with his apparent pessimism, attempts to rope him into joining “the cause”. Sparks fly, ideologies clash, intimacy ensues. The usual. The squire diddles and dallies. The revolutionary grows impatient, until finally she entrusts her lover with the time and place of “the society’s” next rallying, bids him to come or else, and leaves for the capital. The squire has a drink and diddles some more. Goes back and forth in his head on the pros and cons of socialism and nihilism in a vaguely Dostoevskian manner. Decides that neither is worth dying for, writes a letter to the revolutionary telling her exactly that, and suggests that she live and die for their romance instead. He regrets the letter and his own apparent cowardice the moment he sends it.

Taking an early train to St. Petersburg, he decides on the way that he will either persuade his lover to abandon the cause or die trying to accomplish it with her. He discovers upon arrival that the revolutionary has been arrested along with all the members of her circle. Terrified of becoming a target himself, he immediately returns

¹ I have but a vague memory of the original title and the work itself is, in any case, irrelevant, since it has long since been deleted by its original author and is presumably lost forever. I will nevertheless include a link to the website on which it was originally published, so that the readers of this assignment may see for themselves the informal nature of this “literary work”. I have chosen this particular story for no other reason than its employment of a trope I wish to discuss. Its use is unauthorised since I regrettably have no means of contacting the author. Some details of the story may have been altered; however, I claim no right over the original storyline. The original story was written in Russian.

[\(https://ficbook.net/\)](https://ficbook.net/)

to his country estate without attempting to contact anyone. The officials question him for his (intercepted) letter to the revolutionary but let him off the hook due to its ridiculously harmless contents. The squire regrets this severely, attends a ball, and has something to drink. A few weeks later he learns that the revolutionary has died of consumption in prison.

Another ten years or so and the actual revolution comes to pass. The squire loses his property and has to make do by marrying the daughter of a party member (willing suspension of disbelief must be employed to accept the prospect of this happening). In his old age, as without achievement as he is now without wife and child, the former squire receives (through circumstances I no longer remember) a faded letter composed by the revolutionary in the final throes of her illness that had been intercepted by sensors. The letter consists almost entirely of fevered ramblings, in which the revolutionary recalls fragments of their short-lived passion (note in particular the account of him lending her his coat during a particularly chilly evening walk around his estate), apologises for having attempted to use him for the sake of her own ambition (that is, her ambition of bringing about a socialist revolution), and professes her love for him.

The former squire reads this, weeps while having a drink, and goes to bed, upon which what is perhaps the most gratuitous of literary devices kicks in and he dreams of his former lover, who is wearing the coat he lent her during their evening walk on his estate, some fifty years ago. He asks her about the pros and cons of socialist revolution, to which she shakes her head and says little. He asks her whether or not she detests him for abandoning her, to which she shakes her head and smiles. He asks her whether or not they will see each other again, to which she shakes her head and replies that no, they won't, since there is no God and therefore no afterlife. The old man wakes, weeps some more (out of joy, if the overbearing presence of the author is to be believed) and later that night dies peacefully in his sleep.

Among the countless cheap romance novels that employ similar plots, this one stuck to me for several reasons: firstly due to its unique historical setting (albeit coupled with what must have been a sorry lack of proper research), secondly due to its feeble, somewhat half-hearted attempts at tackling such topics as political sociology, existentialism, nihilism, and the existence of God, and lastly due to the fact that despite all its obvious faults, it managed to move me to tears. This became even more fascinating when I discovered the features it shared with several other works of fiction that I have cried over, or otherwise had a significant emotional impact on

me—note that I am discussing strictly only the emotional side of things. I wanted to know why they managed to incite empathy from me the way they did, and the nature of that empathy. But first allow me to illustrate the trope in question.

We've all seen it. The heroin lies dying in the hero's arms. The hero is in pieces, perhaps even shedding tears of grief and regret. The heroin is saddened too because she does not want to die; but she nevertheless smiles through tender tears and with her last breath reassures the hero that she is happy and content to be dying: I was glad to have met you, you'll be alright, don't forget me, I'll always be with you, yada yada yada. The hero cries some more. They kiss, and shortly after the heroin expires. The hero may or may not shout his frustration to the skies. It's pretty much the same story—sometimes the gender roles are reversed, but only rarely; in fact, an entire essay on gender and fiction can and should be written on this topic. That, however, is for another time.

We can always imagine another scenario, similar to this one, except instead of smiling the heroin is exceptionally adamant about not wanting to die. She screams. She sobs. She writhes in pain. She accuses the hero of not being able to save her. She insists that this simply cannot be happening to her and that none of it is fair. The hero wails frantically beside her. She dies with her eyes wide open before they even get to share a last kiss. All in all this seems to be quite an unlikely death-scene, at least in my personal experience; it is simply too gruesome, too inelegant, and too undignified for anything other than the most realistic works of fiction, and even in the rare cases where it is done it will perhaps be more for the sake of shock value than anything else.

Thus it would seem that acceptance towards imminent death has something about it that plucks at the heartstrings, to the extent that such scenarios are often incorporated for the sole purpose of making the audience shed a tear—a tearjerker, so to speak.

I will attempt to discuss this phenomenon, mainly with the aid of Camus' essays on suicide and absurdity, in the form of the following questions (given in no particular order): what is the difference between suicide and resignation to death? What is the difference between acceptance and resignation, and what additional appeal does the latter hold? Can death itself be absurd, or does it merely occupy one side of the equilibrium that constitutes absurdity? And finally, what makes resignation towards death aesthetically pleasing when depicted in a certain way?

· The Absurd

According to Camus, absurdity arises when one becomes aware of the unbridgeable rift between the inherent human longing (or, as he calls it, nostalgia) for clarity and the impenetrable density of the outside world; it is thus invariably an equilibrium, since without one factor or the other there can be no contrast and therefore no contradiction. When studied closely the world as we know it sheds all artificial images, designs, and definitions—seals, so to speak—formerly attributed to it and in doing so becomes inhuman, strange, absurd; to be conscious of the world is to be able to see it without the unifying human prism, in all its absurdity. In his essays on what he dubs “philosophical suicide”, Camus goes on to discuss whether or not pursuing the problem of absurdity to its very core will result in actual, behavioural suicide—in other words, whether or not it is possible to live with absurdity without contradicting all that is logical. I must admit that I neither fully understand nor agree with his conclusion on that particular matter which he lays out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and since my inability to be persuaded might very well stem from my inability to understand the reasoning process itself, I shall leave well alone the direct answer to that question (that is, whether or not one should commit logical suicide) and everything that leads up to it. What I instead wish to discuss first is more closely related to one of the minor issues addressed early on in Camus’ essays: how it is that those who commit suicide are often the most assured in the meaning of life.

By committing suicide for a purpose other than dying, one attaches value to their own life—namely the value of the purpose for which they are willing to trade it. By taking one’s life due to disappointment towards the world, one similarly attaches value to it, except through such reasoning they proclaim that said value does not compensate for the suffering it implies, thus life is “not worth living”. In such cases life’s meaning is fortified through value, and just as value becomes significant only through trade, so life gains meaning only in direct comparison to death. In a similar vein, the weight of one’s life only becomes apparent when it is overshadowed by death, culminating at the very brink of death and then expiring altogether.

Here it must be noted that in the instance of the dying heroin who goes out with a smile, her life appears infinitely valuable precisely because of her reluctance to trade it for death (or, in fact, for anything else). In the story of the squire and the revolutionary, the latter’s death seems irrational and unreasonable because her death is neither voluntary nor a direct tribute to a higher cause; it appears, for all intents and purposes, utterly meaningless. In this way, her death is absurd.

In his essays Camus brings up several contemporary existential thinkers who are all in some way or another concerned with the concept of absurdity. Husserl's phenomenological standpoint acknowledges absurdity in its claim that there is no single unifying truth; instead it proposes to simply observe and experience where one would otherwise strain to interpret and comprehend. Consciousness (or intention) focuses in turn on different aspects of the outside world and describes them without ever assigning to them any sort of definition or meaning. Camus, however, believes allowing individual experience to explain itself is no different from searching for a unified meaning from all that can be experienced. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, attempts to exterminate one of the two original factors that constitute absurdity—that is, the thirst for knowledge and understanding, and in doing so cure the absurd man once and for all. His proposed method is having faith in God. Through God even death can be transcended, for when a Christian exits one world they simply enter another, and this one of eternity. Thus even the ultimate terminator of all hopes has been terminated, and one has no reason left not to hope, despite everything of this world trying to convince him otherwise.

· Death

When contemplating death, however, one cannot substitute lucid reason for neutral experience, since death as a rule cannot be experienced—it is the negation of all that can be experienced, the threshold beyond which there exists nothing more to be observed and nothing with which to observe; meanwhile, regarding Kierkegaard's theory, since eternity exists only for those who have made the leap of faith and in doing so dismissed all that is absurd, and since eternity only becomes available through faith in God, escape through it is thus not an option to those who do not acknowledge the existence of God.

We can perhaps arrive at the conclusion that it is ultimately impossible to understand or conciliate the idea of death, at least not with the aforementioned theories. For Camus, and presumably for humanity as a whole, death exists only as an alternative to life. The more gravity we assign to life, the more gravely we must then view death, and it becomes even graver when we consider the fact that we not only cannot wrap our minds around it but also lack the phenomenological alternative of experiencing it “as it is”.

The absurdity here arises not from the state of living, which is Camus' central focus in his essays, but the state of dying—a state that could perhaps be said to have

even less potential meaning than that of living, for it signifies the ultimate end, the so-called impossibility of all possibilities. We can neither experience it nor imagine it, for the mind cannot simulate being non-existent, and a thought cannot consist of absolutely nothing. One cannot desire death, for humans can only desire when they “take [their] places in time”, as Camus puts it—they can only desire what is to take place in a certain point of the future, to be experienced by their own consciousness; but death, while always present in time as its ultimate conclusion, is precisely that—the *conclusion*, after which time is nonexistent and therefore so is the future on which an individual would otherwise project their desires. Death is impenetrable; it constitutes a large part (maybe even the essential part) of what it is to be human and yet there is something fundamentally inhuman about it. The most a person can do is desire to *not live*, for that is as far as our imagination can take us.

It is perhaps for this reason that Camus never discusses suicide in terms of “desiring” death, but only in terms of rejecting life. Death is but the opposite of life and thus the natural alternative to it—a way out, so to speak, but to where? In fact it does seem that in our human capacity we are simply unable to discuss death in its own right. The fact that it is a possibility and a certainty to all of us is, in itself, quite impossible to comprehend, for the human mind is incapable of picturing its own demise.

Thus to accept death is seemingly to come to terms with the incomprehensible; that in itself is perhaps enough to stir the heartstrings due to it being so admirable as to seem inconceivable (which in fact it should be). Acceptance, however, implies consent, and consent in turn implies a certain degree of affinity with the proposal—a sort of reluctant *sure, all right then*. Since we are not discussing suicide or any other case in which death is in some way the objective of one’s actions, we can rule out acceptance and instead focus on the main subject of our discussion: resignation.

Kierkegaard states that through resignation one gains eternal consciousness, which in turn is none other than one’s love for God and, by extension, all that is eternal. It is thus a renouncement of all that is worldly and temporary. According to him, infinite resignation is also the last stage before faith, but the character resigned to impending death refuses to make that leap—they are resigned above all else to the absence of eternity, and since they no longer possess the alternative of life, they are also alleviated of any potential absurdity except that of death itself. In addition to that, such a character does not in any way renounce their worldly existence; they lament the loss of their own life and, if given the choice, would no doubt choose to keep it.

Herein lies their tragedy, for resignation occurs only in the face of the inevitable. Finally, resignation is not, in my opinion, the same thing as despair. Despair recognises and agonises over the absence of hope—it is yet a stage before resignation. The despairing character, who sobs and yells and fights inevitable death with tooth and nail, is too preoccupied with their own indignation to register the true magnitude of their situation, and that is that there was never any hope to begin with and never will be.

· Resignation

In some ways the misguided desire for death perhaps resembles the desire to fall sleep—or, more specifically, to dream. After all, death is often likened to an eternal (albeit most likely dreamless) sleep. Dreams are devoid of absurdity. Everything is logical, everything is clear, everything is consistent: we are one with our dreams in ways we could never be one with the world. We can witness the most outlandish situations in a dream and still feel perfectly reassured as to its meaning. If one ever comes to yearn for death, it is possible they have simply mistaken its connotations for those of a dream; both are, after all, alternatives to lucid consciousness.

In popular culture, the dead also have a penchant for coming back in dreams, like the revolutionary did in the above-mentioned story. Characters in the living world tend to dream up or even hallucinate their loved ones. More often than not these phantoms are affectionate or at the very least forgiving—they seem to exist for no other purpose than to aide their friends and family in moving on. Arima Kousei in *Your Lie in April* sees his love interest, who earlier that day went under surgery, appear on stage during his concert and realises she is dead; she plays a duet with him, at the end of which she smiles and disappears in a ray of light. John Watson in *Sherlock* sees his dead wife on every corner of the street; she continually references her own death, urges him to get his life together, and when he finally confesses his infidelity to her in a fit of anguish, she simply smiles, offers him a few well-versed encouragements, and disappears.

It can of course be argued that these apparitions are simply products of the imagination and do not in any way reflect the sentiments of the deceased characters themselves; what matters, however, is that the narratives of fictional works tend to portray them in such a way as to make the emotional impact no less significant. Either way, resignation or even acceptance on the part of the deceased is intended to serve as reassurance for the living, thereby paving the latter's own paths towards resignation,

which can be just as aesthetically pleasing as with the case of the dying characters themselves.

In the opening story our squire receives his reassurance in two forms: a letter and a dream. The revolutionary, who knows and dreads the fact that she is dying and who could very well have chided her lover for bailing on her, instead apologises for her own selfishness. *Apologises!* There is no greater tragedy than the dead (or the dying) apologising, except perhaps them apologising for dying. It has the same impact and absurdity as one apologising for being born, for both are occurrences over which one has no control; attempting to shoulder a responsibility on that scale is laughable, yet strangely moving for the exact same reasons. It carries similar connotations to the man who shoots himself in order to become God. But the man-god has no victims, while the character that dies an involuntary yet dignified death is glorified by the injustice with which they have been dealt; through their resignation, they become martyrs of human mortality. They “forgive” what can by nature neither be forgiven nor comprehended. The more these somber characters have to lose and the more reluctant they are to lose it, the more lamentable their deaths become, and consequentially the more absurd their apologies, for one gets the sense that *they* should be the ones receiving apologies for their untimely deaths. It is for this absurdity that the squire weeps over his lover’s letter and John Watson cries over being forgiven by his dead wife.

The squire’s personal tragedy (for it is without a doubt personal) is ultimately resolved by his dream, in which the revolutionary tells him that they will never see each other again (the coat is another touch specifically designed to induce tears—it is a sober reminder of a former life, complete with all its mundaneness and unattainability). Only then is the squire finally liberated and, in some ways, qualified to join his dead lover in martyrdom, for up to that point he had been tormented by the age-old debate concerning God’s existence: if, on one hand, there is no eternal God, then he has no chance of ever seeing his lover again, not even after death; if, however, there is a God, then in order to gain entrance to eternity he must first believe in His existence, and in doing so go against all his former ideologies. Not to mention the revolutionary, being something of a nihilist as was fashionable at that time, never believed in God anyway. After being assured (presumably by his own subconscious) that there is no God and therefore no one waiting for him beyond death’s doors, he is finally free to give up what remaining hope he might have had and surrender himself to death, that is, none-existence in the purest sense. In this utter absence of both hope

and faith, a sort of aesthetic height is reached—that of resignation, for the dead as well as for the living.

According to Kuki Shuuzo's *The Structure of Iki*, a work on Japanese taste and aesthetic, one of the three pinnacles of Japanese culture is *teinen* (諦念). It is an essential aspect of *iki*, that is (to put it in a simple but perhaps wildly inaccurate way), the Japanese idea of all that is aesthetically pleasing. Unfortunately I do not, at the time of writing, have access to an academically approved English translation of the word, therefore I will not risk applying my own translation to it; instead I will cite its highly simplified definition: "*Teinen* is the awareness of one's own powerlessness, which has been said to be best represented in the Japanese branch of Buddhism. Furthermore, it can also be seen as corresponding to the Japanese people's tendency of being decisive [in particular on when to give one's all and when to give up] and not fussing over material possessions."² *Teinen* in this sense can perhaps be interpreted as something akin to resignation, although an abundance of cultural context forbids it from being equated to any concept other than itself. Kuki in his work associates *teinen* with an indifference borne of worldly weariness, which he goes on to attribute to jaded prostitutes.

Despite sharing the common feature of being aesthetically pleasing, I believe *teinen* and the resignation I wish to discuss here are in fact quite different. *Teinen* implies disregarding and even scorning all that is worldly; resignation in the face of death, on the other hand, is by no means contempt for all that is materialistic and mortal. As mentioned before, it is resignation to the fact that life is and henceforth will forever be unobtainable despite a great longing for it. I cannot stress enough the importance of the latter part of this definition—the longing for life, the firm belief that life is worth living, must be clearly acknowledged and addressed. Its nature as a biological instinct is in this case quite irrelevant; in fact, the more assertive this longing is, the more extraordinary it will seem to dismiss it.

In conclusion, resignation in the face of death, as a trope found in popular culture that is often deployed with the purpose of inducing empathy, is perhaps best summed up by the following remark: "*I cannot believe this is happening to me, it is inevitable yet I don't understand it, I don't deserve it, but I blame no one and all is well.*"

² http://buna.arts.yorku.ca/japanese/ajlt/wakon_yosai/kuki.html