



## The Classic Book I'd Like to Rewrite (and Why)

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**T**HE CLASSIC BOOK that I would like to rewrite is *The Fall* by Albert Camus. The book is famous for exposing the 'fake' concern that we often show to other human beings. The anti-hero of the book is Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a highly successful barrister who has a powerful reputation for winning cases or damages on behalf of 'widows and orphans'. He loves nothing more than to help a blind man cross the street — and then he tips his hat to him. He begins to realise how self-aggrandizing his actions are. One night, walking home alone in Paris, very late, he sees a young woman throw herself into the Seine — there is no one about and he does nothing to save her from drowning. He rationalises this action to himself but in fact he remains haunted by his failure to act. The last words of the novel are:

Young woman! Throw yourself in the water again so that I might once more have the opportunity to save us both! [...] Brrr...the water's so cold! No, don't worry. It's too late now, it will always be too late. Thank goodness!

The book is written by a lapsed Catholic and it obsesses over religion and Jean-Baptiste's own loss of faith. In fact, this novella (it is less than a hundred pages) becomes increasingly dense and hard to follow for someone who, like most modern liberals, has no faith at all. Jean-Baptiste has taken himself to somewhere he considers Hell — the water city of Amsterdam with its concentric circles, the entire city below sea level.



It is the loss of faith that I recognise and find so resonant today. It is resonant because we no longer stress over how faith-*less* we are.

How would my post-Camus, post Jean-Baptiste man of 2021 (a theatre director, not a barrister) behave if he had left that stranger to drown? What does *he* go through as a result of that splash?

Well, it interrupts his flow. He wants to ignore it but he can't. He tries to reappraise himself, but he lacks the emotional vocabulary to analyse himself morally. He's not even 'lapsed'. He can't talk to himself about his inaction. However hard he tries, he fails to 'move on' because his life is a series of projects with positive outcomes. He can't see that he is fatally addicted to his own success. And every time he succeeds, he fails more. His very success in his career is his failure as a human being.

Having written for young people for most of my writing career, I wanted to write as I am, to create a man who has seen and done the sorts of things I've done and seen — and then collapses entirely as a human being. The key thing he will try to understand is that it is insufficient to grasp, say, Bach's *St John Passion* or Van Eyck's *Mystic Lamb of God* from only an aesthetic viewpoint. He must at least grasp the faith that inspired these works — even if he is unable to share it.