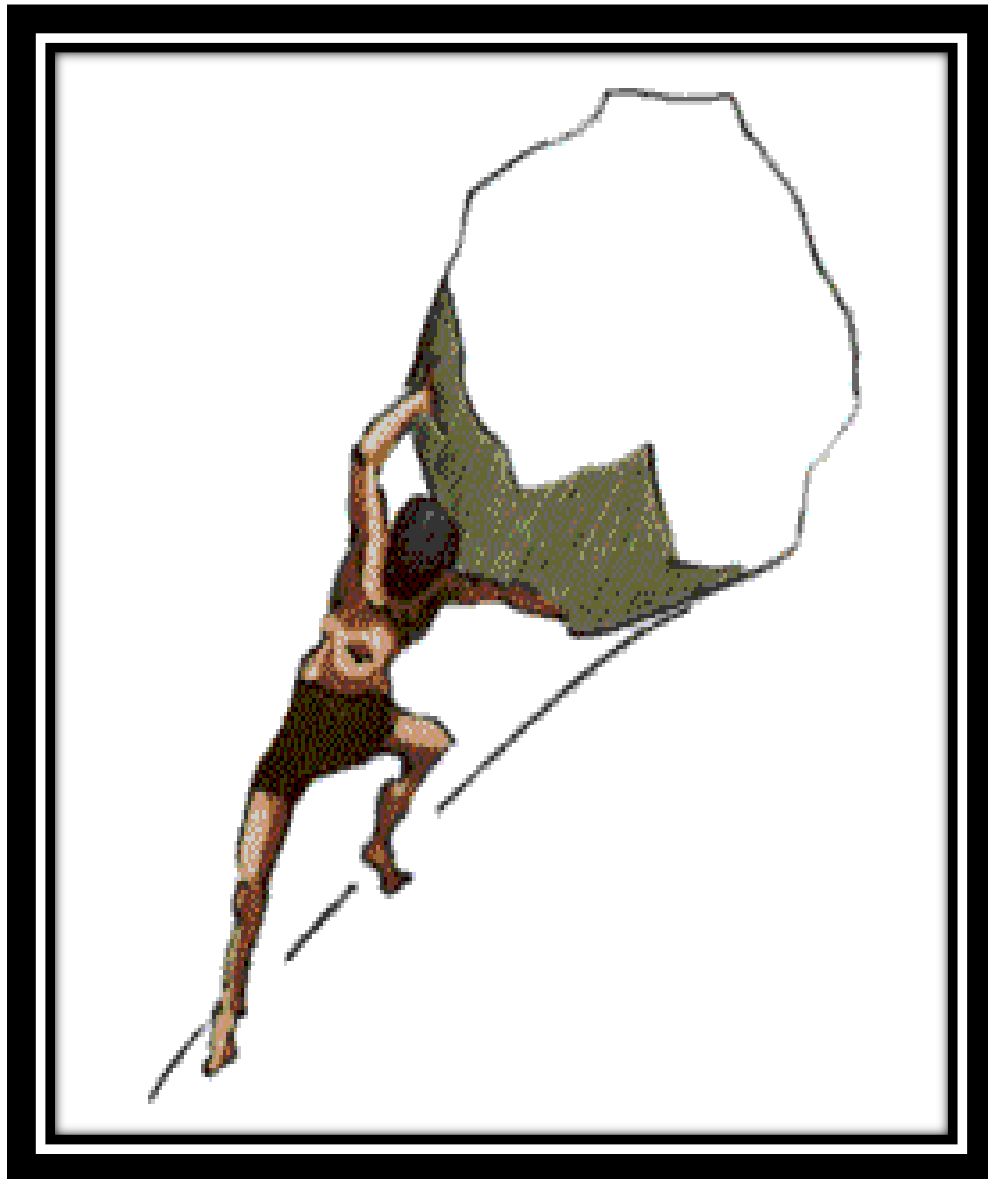


# Sisyphus' Crimes and Punishment

## Greek Mythology



# Sisyphus' Crimes and Punishment

Sisyphus' father was King Aeolus of Thessaly. His mother was Enarete. He had a strained relationship with his brother, Salmoneus, who drove around in a bronze chariot imitating Zeus. Sisyphus fathered a daughter, Glaucus, with Merope, a nymph. Variations of his story suggest that Sisyphus had many children, and at least three wives. Sisyphus was the founder and King of Corinth.

Sisyphus had a scandalous reputation as the most tricky and deceitful person on earth. As a promoter of commerce, Sisyphus was known as ruthless and greedy. In fact, it is said that he killed travelers and highwaymen with huge stones.

It is written that Sisyphus possessed a large herd of cattle. His neighbor, Autolycus, owned a smaller herd. Autolycus decided to steal Sisyphus' cattle one-by-one. Sisyphus saw his neighbor's herd grow as his own was diminishing in size. He quickly thought that Autolycus was the culprit. In order to catch him, Sisyphus wrote his initial (SIS) under the hooves of his cattle. He waited for Autolycus to strike again. He did. Sisyphus ordered his soldiers to raid the yard of Autolycus. They looked and found five cattle with SIS written on their hooves. Autolycus was exposed as a thief.

Autolycus was a great actor as well as a cunning thief. He stated that Sisyphus or his men broke into his cattle yard at night and wrote SIS on his cattle's hooves. In fact, he reported that Sisyphus did not own cattle of that color. Hermes had given Autolycus the power to change the colors of the cattle. He could also change bulls into cows. Hermes was grateful to Autolycus for hiding his mother, Maia, from the jealous Hera who had

planned to kill her before Hermes was born. Zeus had fallen in love with Maia and together they gave birth to Hermes.

Autolycus was rather convincing in his argument, but Sisyphus recovered his cattle. It was not enough to merely prove Autolycus' guilt. Sisyphus took revenge against Autolycus by stealing his daughter, Anticlea who gave birth to their son, Odysseus, the clever Trojan War hero. Some sources say Odysseus was born prior to Anticlea's marriage to Laertus.

At one point, Sisyphus contacted the oracle at Delphi in order to find a way to kill his brother without having to suffer the consequences. One variation of the myth suggests that Sisyphus seduced and violated his niece, Tyro, the daughter of Salmoneus. It wasn't the first time he used a daughter as a potential weapon against her father. Sisyphus learned from the oracle at Delphi that Tyro's children would grow up and murder Salmoneus. She birthed two sons by Sisyphus. However, she killed her children when the oracle at Delphi revealed that Sisyphus was plotting to kill her father.

One day Aegina was carried off by Zeus. Her father, the river god Asopus, was so upset that he told Sisyphus what had happened. Because of Sisyphus' reputation, Asopus asked him if he had taken Aegina. Sisyphus knew what had happened and he offered to tell of her whereabouts if Asopus would give water to Corinth. Asopus agreed. Asopus struck the ground with his club and the spring appeared. Sisyphus told him that he would find his daughter walking with Zeus in the woods. Asopus was overwhelmed with anger.

Zeus was rarely seen without his thunderbolts. However, while romancing Aegina, he hung them in the trees. When Asopus came upon him, Zeus ran away, and turned himself into a rock. Asopus ran by him. As soon as he had the chance, Zeus retrieved his

thunderbolts and he hurled one at Asopus. It struck him in the leg, causing Asopus to limp forever.

Zeus was furious with Sisyphus. As a result, he was punished for divulging Zeus' secret. Zeus ordered Thanatos, the personification of Death itself, to chain King Sisyphus in Tartarus. Tartarus is a dark gloomy pit in the lowest region of the world. This dank region was surrounded by a bronze wall. The Hecatonchires (Cottus, Briareus, and Gyges) stood as guards at the bronze gates. They were to watch over the Titans who lost the battle for control over the Olympians. The Hecatonchires were strong and fierce. Each one had 100 arms and 50 heads. Tartarus was the prison for those who sought to overcome the will of the Olympian gods, and the place for sinners to be punished.

Sisyphus greatest act of trickery came near the end of his life on Earth. When Thanatos came to claim Sisyphus for the Kingdom of the Dead, Sisyphus tricked him into demonstrating how the handcuffs worked. Using his own wrist, Thanatos placed the handcuffs on himself.

Thanatos was kept locked up in Sisyphus' home. As a result, nobody on Earth could die. Sisyphus had bound Death himself. Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, intervened and Ares, the God of War, was sent to free Thanatos. Ares was upset by the fact that no one was subjected to death in battle. Fallen warriors merely arose to see another day. It did not matter how severe their wounds. They walked over the countryside begging for relief, even death. After many days, Thanatos was released and Ares turned Sisyphus over to Thanatos. However, Sisyphus was still up to his trickery.

Before his death, Sisyphus told his wife, Merope, to cast his naked body in the public square. She was not to bury him. He told her that this was her test of love for him. She

did as he ordered. However, after his death, Sisyphus complained to Persephone, Queen of the Dead, that his wife had not given him a proper funeral service. She had not buried him. In fact, as was the custom, his wife had not placed a coin under his tongue to secure passage with Charon the ferryman. As a result, he ended up on the shores of the river Styx.

He asked Persephone to allow him to return to make things right. The kind-hearted Persephone agreed. Sisyphus promised that he would return in three days. When he returned to Corinth, Sisyphus returned to life as usual. There were no concessions made for a proper burial. Sisyphus had no intention of returning to the Underworld. He lived many years after cheating Death.

The great trickster could not terminate his punishment forever. His crimes and indiscretions caught up with him. Hermes dragged him back to the Underworld and he turned Sisyphus over to Hades.

For his crimes against the gods, Sisyphus was condemned to an eternity of futile labor. Sisyphus had been a murderer, rapist, abductor, and a ruthless person full of greed. I consider his punishment to be the result of all of his crimes. However, it is said that Sisyphus' offenses to Hades and Zeus resulted in his eternal punishment in Tartarus, the lowest region of the Underworld. Sisyphus was to roll a great boulder to the top of a hill as his assignment. However, every time he reached the top of the hill, the boulder would roll back down. Throughout eternity, Sisyphus watched himself labor in vain doing such a meaningless task. The labor of Sisyphus has become a metaphor for tasks that are both futile and unrewarding: A Sisyphean Task.

## Study Questions

What was the parentage of Sisyphus?

What evidence is provided that suggests that Sisyphus was wealthy?

Relate the experience of the theft of Sisyphus' cattle. Provide details.

Use three adjectives to describe Autolycus.

How did Sisyphus take revenge against Autolycus?

Some variations of the myth suggest that Odysseus was his son. Who is said to be Odysseus' mother?

Use three adjectives to describe Sisyphus.

Sisyphus' involvement in commerce and trade was treacherous. Explain.

What was Merope's relationship to Sisyphus?

What is the oracle at Delphi?

Describe Sisyphus relationship with his brother, Salmoneus.

Explain Sisyphus plot to kill Salmoneus.

Explain Sisyphus' betrayal of Zeus.

What was his punishment?

How did Sisyphus bind Death?

What is the difference between the titles of Thanatos and Hades?

Describe the Hecatonchires and their responsibilities.

Where is Tartarus and who are designed to go there?

Who allowed Sisyphus to return to the upper part of the world and why?

How long did he stay?

Who returned Sisyphus to Tartarus and how?

What was his punishment?

What could possibly be the connection between his punishment and the way some variations of the story suggest that he killed travelers?

The word “stone” can be used to describe attitudes. Think and discuss this notion as it relates to Sisyphus.

What is your opinion of Sisyphus’ punishment?

What are the characteristics of existentialism?

Camus considers Sisyphus to be happy with his eternal task. Do you agree with Camus? Why or why not?

## **A Discussion of Existentialism**

A philosophy is a study of knowledge and our existence. How do we come to know what we know? Why are we the way we are? Who am I? A philosophy is concerned with our beliefs about reality, and how to live and react to the various situations that arise.

Existentialism is a philosophy.

Albert Camus, who wrote an essay on Sisyphus, is among the well-known writers who are associated with the philosophy of existentialism. It is difficult to explain exactly what existentialism encompasses because there are different attitudes about it. Some existentialists are Christians, while others are atheists. Some have various religious beliefs. Therefore, their thoughts differ. However, the following is a list of ideas that are associated with the philosophy of existentialism.

- We can only understand an individual's life through their life experiences. Each person's experiences are different.
- A whole person is not just filled with intelligence, but the whole person experiences guilt and anxiety.
- Reason cannot be applied to understanding life. Too often, a person's actions defy reason. In other words, we can do things that make no sense at all. The existentialist accepts the person regardless of their strengths and weaknesses.
- People have become so powerless and faceless in this world because we are alienated from one another, from nature, and from our true selves.
- People can be make decisions that result from fear and anxiety. Those decisions can be against the collective laws of mankind. Therefore, there are no laws that completely control a person's actions. (Think about Abraham's decision to take his son's life. He would have violated the law, but he chose to act on it because of his fear of God.)
- Because of our alienated situation, a person experiences a Nothingness existence. Therefore, an individual we question whether there is any purpose to life at all.
- The existentialist views a person as an island that is in isolation. Therefore, people make subjective decisions. The source of their values is internal and they have absolute freedom over their internal nature.



## Albert Camus' Essay: "The Myth of Sisyphus"

Camus had his personal views of Sisyphus' plight. Consider the quotes from Camus' essay and provide your cognitive responses to each. (A cognitive response involves your beliefs.)

<b>Quote from Albert Camus</b>	<b>Your belief</b>
His fate belongs to him.	
If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious.	
A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself!	
The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.	
One must imagine Sisyphus happy.	

## Existentialism and Sisyphus

Existentialism covers several concepts. Read each concept listed and determine how Sisyphus' actions are reflected in such a way that supports or refutes the concept.

<b>The Concept</b>	<b>Sisyphus' Actions</b>
Humans are born with free will. They are absolutely free. Therefore, humans determine the meaning of their lives.	
Stress and consequences accompany the choices we make in life.	
Humans attempt to escape their responsibilities by denying or avoiding them.	
Humans must fight for their lives.	
Humans are conscious beings that should not be manipulated.	
Humans are simply "here." They are thrown into an absurd world.	
You are the decisions you make.	

## The Absurd Hero

According to Camus, the “Absurd Hero” is one who recognizes that victory lies in freedom. However, hope does not exist. Life is futile and humans recognize that they must attempt to complete useless and meaningless tasks because it is their responsibility. How is Sisyphus an “Absurd Hero?”



## Major Gods and Goddesses

The myth of Sisyphus appears in both Greek and Roman mythology. The following is a chart that will help you clarify the names of the gods and goddesses in variations of the Sisyphus story.

<b>Greek</b>	<b>Roman</b>	<b>Title</b>
<b>Aphrodite</b>	Venus	Goddess of beauty and love
<b>Apollo</b>	Apollo	God of prophecy, music, and the sun
<b>Ares</b>	Mars	God of war
<b>Artemis</b>	Diana	Sister of Apollo; goddess of the hunt
<b>Athena</b>	Minerva	Goddess of wisdom and crafts
<b>Demeter</b>	Ceres	Goddess of fertility, grain, and agriculture
<b>Hades</b>	Pluto	Lord of the Underworld
<b>Hephaistos</b>	Vulcan	God of volcanoes; he is a craftsman and blacksmith.
<b>Hera</b>	Juno	Queen of the gods
<b>Hermes</b>	Mercury	The messenger god
<b>Persephone</b>	Proserpina	Queen of the Underworld
<b>Poseidon</b>	Neptune	God of the sea
<b>Zeus</b>	Jupiter	King of the gods



Demeter



Athena



Hades



Artemis



Apollo



Persephone



Poseidon



Hermes



Zeus



Aphrodite



Hera



Ares