

The Ideal I, Ideal Ego, and Ego-Defense Mechanisms: A Lacanian Reading of Clamence in Albert Camus's *The Fall*

M. Thommai Michael¹   & Dr J. Jebaraj Kingsly Zechariah²  

Abstract

Clamence, the protagonist of Albert Camus's The Fall, offers a rich psychological case study for examining and interpreting Lacanian psychoanalysis. This paper explores Lacan's The Mirror Stage as Formative of the "I" Function from Écrits, highlighting the concepts of the Ideal I, Ideal Ego, and ego-defence mechanisms while blending Lacanian psychology with Camus's existential philosophy. Clamence, a former Parisian lawyer, experiences a moral and ideal collapse and psychological fall following his guilt over failing to save a woman who jumped from a bridge, compounded by the subsequent public humiliation. This overwhelming guilt transforms him into a self-proclaimed judge-penitent in Amsterdam. These psychoanalytic concepts contribute to the psychological depth and complexity of Clamence's character. This paper examines Clamence's dual role as both judge and penitent from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. The analysis further considers how Clamence's fractured self-image and persistent need for recognition shape his shifting identity and moral discourse. It argues that his transformation into the judge-penitent reveals the tension between the idealized self and the divided subject central to Lacanian thought.

Keywords: Legendary Psychasthenia, Ideal I, Ideal Ego, Ego-Defense Mechanisms, *imago*

Submitted: 18.08.2026 Revised: 20.09.2026 Accepted: 25.09.2026 Published 30.09.2026

¹M. Thommai Michael, PhD Research Scholar (Reg. No. 241112702043), Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai- 627007, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Dr J. Jebaraj Kingsly Zechariah, Research Supervisor, Assistant Professor, Research Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai- 627007, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli- 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2026 M. Thommai Michael & Dr J. Jebaraj Kingsly Zechariah. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

The Lacanian mirror stage offers an excellent synthesis when analysed alongside Albert Camus' philosophical character Clamence, known for his guilt in *The Fall*. *The Fall* "can be said to reveal, in allegorical form, the flipside of The Stranger: that is, a well-concealed desire to place oneself above everyone else as the "judge of judges", in a position of moral superiority" (Tomic and Paveskovic 560). The research explores the ideal I, ideal ego, and ego-defence mechanisms through Clamence's philosophy of the judge penitent.

The Fall, first published in 1956, is Albert Camus's final complete work of fiction. "Illness was a major event in the life of Albert Camus. He was marked by tuberculosis since his youth, and he had to fight the disease until his death" (Montero Bosch 840). It unfolds through a series of dramatic monologues delivered by the self-proclaimed judge-penitent Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who confesses his life story to a stranger. Although outwardly philanthropic, Clamence is a celebrated Parisian lawyer renowned for helping widows and orphans—but his moral hypocrisy and pride belie his altruism. He believes that unwaveringly aligning himself with virtuous causes secures both his conscience and his zest for life. *The Fall* examines Clamence's complex persona in Amsterdam, a study that Lacan's mirror stage can rigorously interrogate.

Lacan introduced the mirror stage, or the formative function of the "I," in his lecture of July 17, 1949.

Jacques Lacan's Seminar "I" (1954) draws heavily on the distinction between "ideal ego" and "ego-ideal", taken from Sigmund Freud's 1914 work *On Narcissism*. Lacan identifies these phrases with his own Imaginary and Symbolic registers, which Jacques-Alain Miller understandably places at the center of Seminar I. Against one interpretation of Lacan, this article contends that the Imaginary and the Symbolic cannot generate the Real because they presuppose it. (Harman 2)

Aim and Objectives

This article engages the theories of Lacan, Roger Caillois, Anna Freud, and Carl Rogers to enrich its analysis of Albert Camus' *The Fall*. The mirror stage constitutes an enduring component of subjectivity's structure. As Lacan posits in *Écrits* (2006), the ideal "I" serves as the armour of an alienating identity. His reflections on the mirror stage elucidate how individuals recognise and construct themselves via an idealised reflection. Once the mirror stage is inaugurated in psychological development, the subject erects successive false or inauthentic identity systems that even the most meticulous psychoanalytic scrutiny cannot dismantle to reveal an ultimate self. Moreover, the Lacanian psyche is wholly structured by and through language: people apprehend both themselves and others via linguistic articulation.

Discussion

In the Lacanian view, human identity is constantly changing because of rapidly

changing conglomerations of images and a lack of self-comprehension. One can understand this phenomenon through the *imago* from the mirror stage. The Latin term *imago* simply means “image” in English. Carl Gustav Jung introduced the concept into psychology; for Jung, the individual constructs a personality by identifying with various imagos that emerge from the collective unconscious—a shared reservoir of archetypal figures and narratives. In Clamence’s case, his predominant imago is that of a virtuous lawyer and champion of the poor in Paris. This singular image merely hints at the deeper complexity of his ego ideal. Clamence reinforces this ideal through his confessions to the unnamed listener (and, by extension, the reader), emphasising his past deeds and impeccable manners. He prides himself on distinguishing his conscience from others’, defining his identity through polite behaviour and moral rectitude.

Jacques Lacan in his *Écrits*. “The symbolic matrix in which the “I” is precipitated in primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject” (Lacan 76).

Camus’s work contains “blind and instinctive” aspects that the author himself pointed out as insufficiently considered by the critics. The questioning of conscience from a cognitive and moral point of view runs through his entire production, often trying to situate itself in the uncertain division that separates and brings together the animal and man. (Gamoneda Lanza 420)

This definition applies directly to Clamence’s character arc. Here, the mirror consists of the people around him. He shapes his ego by comparing himself to others and distancing himself from them. This constitutes Clamence’s initial mirror stage, though readers of *The Fall* encounter no account of his childhood traumas. His ideal “I” attains a seemingly permanent status even as it forebodes his alienation.

Ego Defenses occupy a precarious stance against the id’s instinctual demands. When these impulses threaten psychic equilibrium, the ego deploys mechanisms such as repression and sublimation.

“Lacan’s mirror stage allows human individuals to come to know themselves as “I”. By establishing a permanent split within the subject’s self-image, this process also lays the foundation for forms of psychic distress such as anxiety, neurosis, and psychosis,” from EBSCO, published by Salvatore Cullari and Carol A. Kusché. Clamence’s ideal is to stay away from ordinary domestic life. He doesn’t consider himself ordinary, just like the people of Paris. He sets his consciousness high above others. Like an iceberg, one can view Clamence’s ego ideal developing to its core. One must recognise his ego’s hypocrisy, which drives him into a symbolic, imaginary framework of the ideal.

Six hundred metres above a sea that was still visible and bathed in sunlight, was the place where I felt most at ease, especially if I was alone, high above the human ants. Life, its creatures and its gifts came to me, and I accepted these tokens of esteem with benevolent pride. In fact, through being a man in

such fullness and simplicity, I felt I was something of a superman. (Camus 19)

In German, “Innenwelt” refers to the inner world; in Lacan’s usage, it contrasts with the “Umwelt” environment or surroundings to suggest the mental experience of interiority that accompanies the “I” formed in the mirror stage.

This Innenwelt sometimes manifests itself in dreams through images of fortresses and other protected, enclosed spaces, from Criticallink, Lacan: The Mirror Stage Terms. He narrates to the listener, and, modestly, Clamence glorifies his successful life in Paris. He even knows the true meaning of Eden from childhood. According to Clamence, he is more intelligent than anyone else in Paris. Many even want to follow him, but they fail. He remarks on them as idiots. He is free of all responsibilities; he is neither a family man nor a priest.

Lacan would argue this ego is imaginary, a defence against the lack at the heart of subjectivity. He wants to be an ideal man of chivalry. He is presented as an ideal man in society; to do so, he goes against his natural traits. The German word Umwelt means environment or surroundings. Lacan contrasts the term with Innenwelt - the inner world - to emphasise the interaction between the imaginary interior space that the “I” occupy and the physical world in which the living human subject is situated... from Criticallink, Lacan: The mirror stage terms.

When Clamence faces humiliation from the people around him, this tends to turn the iceberg upside down. The humiliations he faces shatter his ego’s utilitarian function. Clamence’s ego seems shaped by his need to be seen as good and useful—a lawyer, a benefactor. He often visits the bar named Mexican City in Amsterdam. In the bar, he meets strangers and manipulates them with his eloquence and friendly manner. He just confesses his past to the unnamed listeners. “In Clamence, there was a profound need - a specter that lingered and haunted - to narrate his life, especially the fall that triggered it and the judgment that allowed him to do it” (Kahambing 210). Ego Ideal—A self-image of perfection that serves as a reference point against which actual behaviour is measured, generating pride when one lives up to it and dissatisfaction or guilt when one falls short. According to the American Psychological Association:

Carl R. Rogers (1902–1987) is esteemed as one of the founders of humanistic psychology. He developed the person-centred, also known as client-centred, approach to psychotherapy and developed the concept of unconditional positive regard while pioneering the field of clinical psychological research. (The American Psychological Association)

Incongruence (Ideal-Actual Discrepancy): feelings of shame, inadequacy, or self-criticism surface when reality falls short of the ideal I. His ideal I bursts forth when he is vulnerable to the cyclist whom he couldn’t fight back against, but for Clamence, the incident affected his sense of pride and identity. The utilitarian function operates not for truth or authenticity, but for its usefulness or role in achieving certain outcomes.

He has extreme qualities; even though a non-believer, he is modest. He is very popular and enjoys great social success. His ideal “I” shatters when someone he can’t fight back against hits him, but for Clamence, the incident affects his sense of pride and identity. He is confused at the moment when he isn’t ready to hit back. His ideal ‘I’ becomes absurd after he is publicly humiliated; he can no longer pretend to be that ideal man. “But after having been struck in public without striking back, it was no longer possible for me to nurture this fine image of myself” (Camus 34).

He says modern people don’t want to feel guilty, and no one blames anyone else; instead, they normalise pretending not to feel bad. Camus’ intention in *The Fall* is a bottomless pit of guilt. Camus uses Elijah, the prophet from the Bible known for leading people to redemption. On the contrary, Clamence is a false prophet who is hollow and offers no salvation for people’s redemption. Being a hypocrite, he confesses to gain power over others through confession and guilt.

Legendary Psychasthenia, a concept developed by the social theorist Roger Caillois, refers to the ability of some animals to alter their appearance in response to their physical environment, like a Chameleon. The experiences of the subject that transfer upon encounter with an external stimulus. His Amsterdam becomes a labyrinthine secular hell with canals instead of infernal rivers, mirroring Dante’s structure in sin monologues paralleling the six circles of hell.

“I (Clamence) live in the Jewish quarter, or what they called the Jewish quarter until over Hitlerite brethren cleared a space in it. He chose to live on the site of one of the greatest crimes in history” (Camus 7, 8). Clamence is tormented by guilt and driven to perpetually judge others, flees Paris’s moral heights, and settles in Amsterdam—his self-created Inferno—much like a secular Satan, compelled to live in guilt so as to justify his role as judge-penitent.

Ego defence mechanisms are unconscious mental processes that help individuals manage overwhelming emotions and protect their psychological well-being. These mechanisms play a vital role in maintaining mental health, much like the immune system protects the body from illness. They are crucial for adapting to life’s challenges, but when misused, they can lead to psychiatric issues and contribute to psychopathology.

“What is a judge-penitent? He propagates himself as double; mine is a double job, that’s all, just as humans are double” (Camus 7, 12). In a June 2003 comment, Bob Corbett says this role echoes Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor, Nietzsche’s Overman, and Heidegger’s and Sartre’s authentic man. He uses this on the morally upright person to expose his own moral flaws. This leaves no innocence in the world. He has a common notion about alcohol and women for his relief, which he believes he deserves. One moment he could not forget in his life was not helping a dead body that floated on the water. He feels the dead man is accusing him. Clamence arrives at a logical conclusion of guilt by stating everyone on earth is guilty of something. He even includes Jesus Christ by recalling the Massacre of the Holy Innocents from the Gospel of Matthew (2:16–18). He uses guilt transference to blame others in

general to escape his own guilt. He lets the innocent die for him. "Clamence came to believe that such guilt enabled everyone to pass judgment on everyone else" (Nasrullah Mambrol). He dreamt of doing it, but he forgot.

Clamence's decision to be a judge-penitent is like Sisyphus rolling a stone, the never-ending profession of judging others. Clamence's role is to judge others as judge-penitent, to escape from the void of guilt and to confess his guilt. Even if he is guillotined, he isn't afraid to die, but he wants his beheaded head to be shown above the crowd to dominate the guilt of the people. He wants to end his career as a false prophet crying into nowhere. "And you would lift my newly severed head above the crowd so that they could recognise themselves in it, and I would dominate them once more as an example to them" (Camus 91).

Conclusion

Clamence is considered his own foil. His confessions and monologues reveal his duplicity and contradiction in personality. In his Innenwelt, he sees himself as the chosen one, or simply Superman, but in reality, he is a judge-penitent. This brings out his hypocrisy and existential crisis; this is called self-filing to go further in the study of the character. Like Adam and Eve, Clamence can't return to his Eden after his fall.

Works Cited

- American Psychological Association . *Carl Rogers, PhD 1947 APA President*. American Psychological Association , June 2021, <https://www.apa.org/about/governance/president/carl-r-rogers>.
- Camus, Albert. *The Fall*. 1956. Translated by Robin Buss, 003 ed., Penguin UK, 2013.
- . *The Fall*. <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/personal/reading/camus-fall.html>. Accessed 7 Aug. 2025.
- Cullari , Salvatore, and Carol A. Kusché. "Ego Defense Mechanisms." *EBSCO Information Services, Inc. / Www.Ebsco.Com*, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/ego-defense-mechanisms>.
- Gamoneda Lanza, Amelia. "The Fall into Consciousness: Animality, Philosophy and Cognition in Camus's Works." *Çédille: Revista de Estudios Franceses*, no. 18, 2020, pp. 415-443. <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.cedille.2020.18.17>.
- Harman, Graham. "Ideal Ego and Ego-Ideal in Lacan's *Seminar I*." *Open Philosophy*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2025-0124>.
- Kahambing, Jan Gresil. "The Specter of Narration and Hypocrisy in Albert Camus' *The Fall*." *Pertanika Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2020, pp. 207-220.

- Montero Bosch, David. "Illness, Collapse, Defeat: Albert Camus' *The Fall*." *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, suppl. 5, 2016, pp. 837-846.
<https://doi.org/10.6018/daimon/271301>.
- Lacan, Jacques, and Bruce Fink. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. W. W. Norton, 2006.
- Lacan, Jacques, et al. *Écrits the First Complete Edition in English*. W.W.Norton & Company, pp. 75-81,
<https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Lacan%20Mirror%20Stage.pdf>. Accessed 2006.
- Tomic, Marinko, and Antun Paveskovic. "Girard's Reading of Camus's *The Stranger*." *Nova Prisutnost*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2023, pp. 557-569.
<https://doi.org/10.31192/np.21.3.5>.